



17/02033/FUL & 17/02034/LB - Herman Miller Uk Locksbrook Road Newbridge Bath

Internal and external alterations to facilitate general refurbishment of the former Herman Miller building

Comment: BPT commends the applicant on the extent of assessment and detail that has informed this application and also the collaborative approach that has ensured the proposals to make changes to this listed building have been rigorously interrogated and widely consulted upon.

We have considered the planning and heritage issues surrounding the proposals and have listened carefully to the assessment of impact and the planning balance. Our observations on these and other elements of the application are detailed below.

Significance of the heritage asset

The architectural and historic significance of this building is due to its innovative facade system, its place in the “High Tech” architectural movement and the design brief from Herman Miller which strongly requested that the building should be able to change as the needs of the user changed and that it should provide a high quality environment for users. This flexibility of use and space is a key value attaching to the building. The final expression of the facades and elevations were realised as a result of the then current industrial needs and possible future needs of the user, combined with a visual character that reflected technology, functionality and industry. It was not designed to contribute to the more traditional character of the wider local area.

The accepted architectural value of the building as one designed to flex and change (essentially an early intentionally sustainable building) suggests that in theory the proposal to again change the building in line with the original design principles (functional, lightweight changes with appropriate materials) could be supported. The additional support of the original architect strengthens this argument further, as does the fact that the BSAD is in a sense ‘future proofing’ by providing, at the start, adequate floor space for the school’s current and projected future needs. The NPPF states that works to an asset should retain or enhance its significance; in this case works to bring a high value contemporary use to the building that still harmonises with its past use and its intended character as a flexible shell would in our view retain this significance.

It is entirely suitable that Grimshaw Architects are working on the redevelopment of the building considering that one of the elements of significance of the listed buildings is as a representative work of Sir Nicholas Grimshaw early in his career. While the situation of a living architect working on his or her ‘own’ listed building is not unique, (Foster & Partners

have made alterations to the Grade 1 Willis Building in Ipswich, designed by Norman Foster again early in his career) it is certainly beneficial that changes to a listed building be undertaken by the architect who received and interpreted the original brief.

Harm to the heritage asset versus public benefit

In our pre-application response, we expressed concern regarding the rooftop pavilion and its possible impact on the key view of the riverside elevation. Our perception of harm related to the fact that the pavilion was an alien element compared with the uniformity of the earlier structure, and one which disrupted the building's form. We acknowledge that more work has gone into re-designing, re-positioning and shrinking this element of the proposals so that it is now set back and occupies (excluding the plant element) only 15% of the roof area. While it is still an interruption to the form of the listed building, and our preference would be for the envelope of the building not to be disrupted, the iterated design and the proposed materials have gone some way to mitigating the harm. We therefore accept the argument that the pavilion constitutes less than substantial harm to the asset. In addition the simply expressed original design brief of Max De Pree suggested the form of the building required subservience to needs, flexibility to 'change with grace' and 'openness to surprise'. These elements could be argued to be delivered with the redesign.

The amount of public benefit brought by these proposals is substantial, not only in the considerable uplift in the offering to students at Bath Spa University, but the revitalisation of this building following years of decay, a renewed vibrant riverside setting and the outreach and opportunities it will offer to local communities. In this way the building and its significance will be better revealed to the general public.

There are also significant conservation benefits in the desire to re-purpose, repair and regenerate this important building in a high quality way which will ensure its ongoing conservation. In particular we commend the approach to the repair and replacement of the GFRP panels and the commitment to double glaze the glazed elements and re-introduce the original courtyard indents.

In our view the alterations at roof level now proposed mean that the identified harm is adequately mitigated and outweighed by the public and conservation benefits.

Internal alterations

The applicants' intention to refurbish the 'super room' interior with mezzanine additions and sympathetic internal subdivisions and to retain and repair the exposed structure and services are all supported by the Trust. The interior will be an exciting contemporary space again ensuring that the asset is better revealed and its significance more widely understood.

Conclusion

The Bath Cabinet Makers group is an unusual heritage asset in the World Heritage Site, and one which does not sit 'inside the box' of our usual heritage considerations. Therefore

consideration of changes also takes some thinking 'outside the box', which the applicant has done with great care, understanding and respect for the listed building. Therefore BPT accepts the argument that public and conservation benefits outweigh the harm to the asset. We also feel that the proposed works overall will better reveal and therefore enhance the significance of the asset as it enters the next phase of its life as a community building supporting and developing 21st century design and making.