



Constructive Conservation Salon 001

Sekforde Arms, EC1 | 25 October 2018

This note sets out the findings from the first of a series of workshops discussing issues relating to historic buildings, their adaptive reuse and related procedures, organised by Polysemic and Iceni Projects' Heritage and Townscape team.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

Lack of trust

The participants shared a collective frustration about the tendency of Local Authority Conservation Officers not to trust their proposals. The default position taken by Officers seems to disagree with the design team's statement of facts regarding the historic building's fabric, its structural condition and the level of 'harm' that may or may not be caused by the interventions proposed, unless the proposed works are purely like for like repair or restoration.

Lack of structural understanding

Conservation Officers are required to have a basic knowledge of structures when considering historic buildings. Major structural works such as underpinning are often viewed by Conservation Officers as risks to the structural integrity of a building, whereas in reality, if executed properly, there is no reason why such works should be incompatible with historic buildings, and they can serve to improve structural stability and ensure the long-term conservation of the building.

Refusal of consent for new internal services

It was noted that consent could be refused by Officers for simple internal works such as plumbing and wiring runs, based on the perceived harm that this could cause to the fabric of a building.

Lack of consistency between officers

There is a lack of consistency in approaches from officers, even within the same local authority. Whilst we can provide copious amount of information and engage with officers as far early as possible, a more consistent approach to dealing with standard works should be formulated by accrediting bodies such as IHBC and ICON. Historic England is very supportive of the positive ways of refurbishing historic building, and as practitioners we should be able to challenge officers on this basis. Being thorough in our approach and evidence would strengthen our case.

WHY DO THESE ISSUES ARISE?

It is important to acknowledge that the mistrust perhaps stems from the Officer's past experiences of poorly conceived and ill-informed proposals leading to loss of significant features; or a general lack of appreciation of the building itself amongst some applicants and consultants with dismissive arguments regarding its condition and significance. Many engineers assess the condition and stability of historic buildings according to today's standards for new construction, thus giving Officers reasons to doubt their conclusions. Additionally, with forever reducing resources, most officers are under tremendous pressure and are often unable to provide responses that are robust enough or provide any feedback at all.

Attendees

Gideon Purser

Partner, Chris Dyson Architects

Tswai So

Director, Spheron Architects

Elizabeth Webster

Director, Fraher Architects

Chloe Marshall

Associate Director, Hawkins Brown

Katie Hannah-Wright

Architect, F3 Architects

Brian Constant

Director, Constant Engineers

Tom Ashton

Engineer, Constant Engineers

Dan Jestico

Sustainable Design Director, Iceni Projects

Tom Brooks

Heritage and Townscape, Iceni Projects

Ailish Killilea

Heritage and Townscape, Iceni Projects

Edwina Coward

Heritage and Townscape, Iceni Projects

Stephen O'Fegan

Heritage and Townscape, Iceni Projects

Organisers

Christopher Daniel

Director, Polysemic

Nairita Chakraborty

Associate, Heritage & Townscape, Iceni Projects



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SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

Early site visits and investigation works

One way to gain the 'trust' of the Conservation Officer is to request a site visit with them at the start of the process, prior to any proposals being envisaged. This would help gauge their attitude towards the condition of the building: do they think this is as bad as envisaged or do they reckon it is better and worthy of more protection. This further helps to inform the level of intervention that may be realistically achieved. It also gives them the 'satisfaction' that they have been heard. Getting initial feedback from engineers regarding the structural issues would also be key.

Undertaking an initial reconnaissance of the building for the 'first visit' by the Conservation Officer would help in giving some indication of their attitude as well as the condition of the building. Minor opening up works should then follow to help inform any structural proposals including bespoke design solutions. Physical evidence of rot and decay would give enough confidence to the officer behind the reasoning of the proposal rather than a presumption that 'it is old, it must be decaying'. Details of the deliverability and buildability of the proposal would further help convince officers at an initial stage rather than being left to conditions.

Ensuring applications are sufficiently detailed

If the conclusions of the Officer are hugely different from the consultant's own observation, the justification side of the works need to be robust. Initial opening up works, with agreement from the Conservation Officer is the best way to continue the positive dialogue, supported by archival information. Often, it is the other way around, i.e. archival maps regressions etc with not much fabric related evidence, thus not giving enough confidence to the Officer. These opening up works ought to be undertaken prior to formulation of proposals, again to give confidence to the Officer that all proposals have been undertaken after a thorough understanding of the building's historic fabric, not just regression maps.

When considering new extension to building, it is not necessary that these can only allowed if there was a prior building at the location. The design and scale of the extension would need to be 'subtle' and 'unpastiche' to allow for it to sit next to the listed building without overpowering them. Objections, such as those received by Gideon on Sekforde would be common. But here again, the justification ought to be extremely nuanced to show why the extension is necessary and what would be the 'public/heritage benefits' of doing so. To further convince the officer, information about 'buildability' and 'deliverability' should be provided at the application stage and not left to conditions. These issues often come up later when permission has already been granted, leaving the Officer's opinion compromised with poor quality materials or an extension that cannot be built at all, leaving perhaps the historic building vulnerable and vacant. It is this fear that then inculcates further mistrust amongst them.

The best way to ensure that internal servicing works are authorised, is to incorporate them in the original refurbishment work application and ensure that M&E engineers have been consulted and relevant drawings and details are supplied as part of the application itself. Often these works are conditioned, in which case the details could be ironed out at that stage. Again, to keep the 'trust' not just drawings, but also method statements of undertaking the works should be provided, including those relating to removal and reinstatement. This would give the Officer confidence that works have been thought through and is not an afterthought.

In most cases, the solutions for a historic building is likely to be non-standardised. Again, this would need nuanced justification of deliverability and buildability; and evidence that the products/materials would not be value engineered. In many cases a sample would be key to convince officers of the product's or material's quality. Detailed section drawings would help illustrating as to how the solution would be built on site.

Justifying harm

An important argument for justifying work to the listed building is illustrating the 'public benefits'. These are different in the planning policy terms from what are commonly 'planning benefits'. Any work that promotes the optimal viable use of the listed building is considered to be a benefit. That includes a large extension to an already large house, as it allows for the building to be used by its occupier for a longer time, who would otherwise abandon it and move on to another. The consideration, as before, should be that the extension is 'subtle' and of a scale and materiality that does not appear intrusive to the main building.

Other benefits for non-residential buildings could include community benefits- such as refurbishment of a pub, an art gallery or any other community venue where people can gather. Activating the frontage is also considered a



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townscape benefit that could be argued to add to the character of the wider area. Again, the arguments would need to be nuanced and positively put forward.

Where harm cannot be overcome, it may be mitigated. For example, if fabric is removed, part of the salvaged fabric could be reused elsewhere where features are missing- such as a missing window, fireplace or architrave within the same building. Undertaking restoration of the main fabric alongside a large extension to an inconspicuous part of the building is a common way of achieving greater usability of the building whilst mitigating impact of the proposed extension.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

As the first event, introduction of participants to each other and their relative expertise was a key part of the discussions. Almost everyone had undertaken or were in the process of undertaking works to a listed or historic building.

Gideon Purser started the discussions with the example of the venue- Sekforde Arms PH, listed at grade II. He described the difficulties of justifying a new build extension directly attached to the listed building and Islington Council's Conservation Officer's objections to the same. He further added the additional works that the Conservation Officer had requested that, to him, were unjustified. This included the removal of the concrete lintels to be replaced with traditional brick lintels. Other issues included the removal of the bar and floorboards and reinstating them.

Katie Hannah-Wright discussed her experience of working on various listed buildings in Tottenham dealing with disabled access issues and building control. Although extremely sensitive approaches were taken by the architects and contractors, the regulations regarding disabled access and building regulations were difficult and relevant consultants and officers were unable to acknowledge the sensitivity of the building.

Brian Constant discussed his experience of structural engineering issues including internal works to buildings where even very minor works were advised to seek listed building consents. Underpinning is the most common and safe way of increasing structural stability of the buildings and officers are often not convinced of the reasonings.

Christopher Daniels discussed his experience of integrating important structural and architectural elements such as 'sculptural' staircases within the refurbished spaces and the engineering and fabric related issues he has come across.

Chloe Marshall gave an account of her experiences working on Hackney Town Hall. She suggested that her approach of highlighting the hierarchy of spaces and basing the proposal on this hierarchy convinced officers that the significance would be 'preserved' and 'enhanced'. Throughout the project, she maintained an extremely close partnership with the Council with the theme of 'preserving the function' of the building and its historic use. Where there were highly significant spaces, patchy repair works were undertaken to allow for the 'patina' of fabric to illustrate itself. This meant that costs could be kept lower too. The 'public benefit' of increasing the capacity of the building by 70%, increasing the functionality of the building by providing further integral spaces within the existing fabric meant that any 'harm' was overcome by the benefits.

As an ex-conservation officer, Nairita Chakraborty was able to provide insight into how these issues could be acknowledged and overcome.

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