

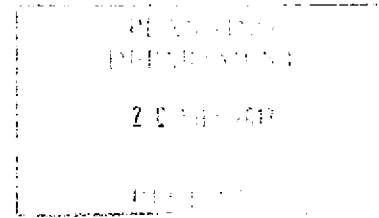
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6th. Rep LA
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CONSERVATION & DESIGN ADVICE

WHBC Offices, The Campus, WGC

N6/2013/1938/MA



Proposed 3 storey rear (east elevation) infill extension & single storey rear extension to provide additional office accommodation, Council Chamber & associated works: Amended proposals

The reason for consultation to BEAMS (as Conservation & Design consultants to WHBC) is the location of the offices within the WGC Conservation Area & the identification of the original 1935 offices building as a building of local interest, that contributes positively to the character of the conservation area.

Assessment of the 1935 Council Offices building

The Council Offices- designed by the young architect CH (Cecil Harry) Elsom (1912- 2006), who won the competition in 1933- are distinctly characteristic of the Garden City language of the neo-Georgian style, though with a dash of neo-vernacular influence & Arts & Crafts flourish.

The symmetrical 7-bay, 2 & a half storey principal west elevation frontage of the 1935 building to The Campus is classically understated (almost bland), though relieved with a strong central vertical axis, emphasising the subtly designed stone surround to the entrance & formal doors to the shallow balcony above, culminating in the focal point of the rather quirky but fine domed clock tower, placed on a zig-zag base, set on the ridge of the roof. 5 dormer windows, above the parapet line & string course, follow the vertical proportions & rhythm of the neo-Georgian fenestration below. The other elevations of the building are sub-ordinate & plain but follow the same neo-Georgian principles & proportions for the most part. The main feature of the rear (east) elevation is the elegant, slim campanile, to approximately the same height as the clock tower.

The integrity of the 1935 building has, to some extent, been retained, despite the later 20th century, rather awkward, side extension to the north, by articulating it as a linked addition. None-the-less, the original building remains as the key architectural reference for any future development or extension, being finely attuned to the de Soissons & Kenyon low-key, discreet Garden City design approach, harmonising with the formal civic & commercial buildings nearby.

Elsom would inevitably have been also much influenced by Parker & Unwin (e.g. the First Garden City Estate Office, Broadway, Letchworth, 1913) & by the neo-Georgian buildings of Lutyens & the other architects of the Garden City Movement at Letchworth & Hampstead Garden Suburb & beyond, in adopting the formality of the neo-Georgian style for such a prominent civic building.

The proposed extension- as amended

There are, as almost always with any historic building located within a conservation area, many different possible approaches to provide the sought-after accommodation as an extension to these offices. These range from a discreet, contextual design, harmonising & reflecting, & perhaps even imaginatively re-interpreting, the neo-Georgian language & vocabulary, of Elsom, to more bold, & clearly contrasting, contemporary architecture, following current styles of the 21st century, that demonstrates the evolution of the building over a period of some 80 years.

In considering the principles of appropriate architectural design for this building, there is no clearly right or wrong design approach. Conservation good practice is concerned with ensuring that, generally, extensions should **retain & conserve** the significance, character, appearance & architectural & historic interest of the building. Extensions should **not dominate the existing historic building or its setting**, in either scale, materials of construction or situation. Extensions should be constructed in **materials of clear high quality** that either refer to the historic materials previously used or create an acceptable contrast or juxtaposition to highlight & emphasise the change & sequence of additions over time.

In choosing this relatively bold & obviously quite different appearance for the design of the proposed extensions to Elsom's 1935 building, it is critical that development does not fundamentally *harm* (in terms of the National Planning policy Framework paragraph 134) the undesignated heritage asset (i.e. the existing building) or have a detrimental impact on the character & appearance of the conservation area (a designated heritage asset). The principal elevation of the original building is the west frontage to The Campus- as noted above. The key feature of the plain rear elevation is the campanile. Neither are significantly affected by the proposed extension. The rear east elevation has

far less significance than the key west frontage to The Campus in the perception of the identity of the conservation area. The rear east frontage is facing the side of the nearby supermarket.

The scale of the proposed stone edged framing to the structural glass screen wall (now, in this amended proposal, vertical rather than inclined & with a slimmer, more refined, moulded cross-section) is a bold feature of the extension, which projects through the eaves line of the existing office building- but is, importantly, lower than the ridge of that roof. The side infill walls are in brick with windows of classical proportions. The proposed entrance is emphasised as the focal point of the east elevation, which helps to reduce the perception of an out of scale glazed screen. That screen is sub-divided into vertical glass panels, cut by horizontals of the floor bands, which helps, to some extent, in referring to the proportions of the earlier building.

The materials of the proposed extension are high quality structural glass with stainless steel connections & structural support & a stone surround, set in front of the plane of the glazed screen to form a distinct shadow line, adding somewhat to the richness of this proposed new façade of the extension.

Conclusion

Whilst a building of local architectural & historic interest- the 1935 Elsom building is not a listed building. Though a prominent building in the conservation area, the main significance of the building- the frontage to The Campus- is not harmed by the proposed rear extension. At the rear elevation, the principal feature- the campanile- is retained.

The façade of the proposed east elevation extension is certainly a bold statement, expressing the difference of this part of the building, as a clear contrast to the original neo-Georgian building style. The amendments to the framing of the glazed screen has, it is considered, reduced the assertiveness of the appearance of the earlier proposed extension, to some extent, & increased the refinement of the architectural detailing. The height of the framing does not exceed the ridge of the roof.

On balance, with close attention to the selection of materials of clear high quality & to detail (such as lighting & external views looking into the new extension), the proposed extension would be a functional & striking contemporary addition, which could provide a further layer of interest to this comparatively tucked away part of the conservation area, to the rear of the 1935 offices.