

Planning Applications 09/03930/LBA & 09/03927/VAR Holburne Museum of Art.

Bath Heritage Watchdog objects to this proposal.

In Criterion (i) of the Bath World Heritage Site Statement, of significance is the phrase. "... *Bath's quality of architecture and urban design, its visual homogeneity and its beauty is largely a testament to the skill and creativity of the architects and visionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries who applied Palladianism in response to the specific opportunities offered by the spa town and its physical environment and natural resources (in particular the hot springs and the local Bath Oolitic limestone) ...*"

The key words here are "*visual homogeneity*" and "*Bath Oolitic limestone*". The architectural style is not the issue here, because the extant planning permission suppresses further discussion along those lines; though our views and the views of many others on this is well documented and it is sufficient to say our objection to this remains.

The issue in question is the material, or to be more specific the final colour and effect of that material. A dilemma is created when a material is proposed for a building in Bath that is not a naturally sourced building material but one that is manufactured. It is an established fact that the structure is to be clad in ceramic. However, does the colour of the finished product continue the tradition of visual homogeneity using a colour drawn from the Bath Oolitic limestone palette or does it apply a different approach?

With all the best will in the world computer screens and print cannot give a true visualisation of what is proposed and as a result of the Watchdog's initial response to what was placed on the planning file we were offered a site visit. This proved invaluable.

This visit allowed the Watchdog to see at first hand the samples of the ceramic: both the officer approved sample and that proposed, viewed in situ on the building and also examined at close quarters. We would like to thank the Museum's Director and the Trustees for allowing us the opportunity of doing this. It is a shame, however, that this opportunity is not available to anyone else wishing to comment on the application.

The first point to make is that the material is far different than imagined. It is not a ceramic tile as most people would imagine it. It is more a piece of artwork and here you can see what the architect is aspiring towards. The material is clearly of high quality.

The second point is how the colour varies and changes as you move. Even a slight change of position can have a significant effect. This effect was more pronounced on the proposed sample.

With regard to the colour, it would be near impossible to describe; the approved sample having a lighter base colour more within the palette of Bath stone interspersed with random greyish/white patches, the proposed sample having a darker base colour amid a larger number of random more blue-grey/white patches, and when viewed at close quarters is more akin to marble than oolite. From a distance the base colour and the white patches merge together to give an overall impression of a colour. This will be the effect when installed.

The third point is the finish. Both samples are covered in a protective glaze of some depth. The approved sample is reflective to a degree but it appears as a shallow reflection. The proposed sample is more highly reflective giving deep reflections. It would appear that when sited on the building these tiles and fins will reflect the sky, the foliage, the trees and, of course, the sun. The mottled effects merge into the darker background behind the glaze giving an almost mirror-like finish.

Following the site meeting, it was decided that our photographs would be placed on our website without a recommendation, allowing a free vote to be taken by our group based on these and the descriptive information from our site visit.

The discussion and vote was taken on purely the colour and finish of the samples. In the discussion, it was noted that the Holburne is a Grade I listed building and despite the advice in PPG15 that “... *alterations or repairs to external elevations should respect the existing fabric and match it in materials, texture, quality and colour ...*”, planning permission has already been granted for inappropriate materials and texture. Thus when the DCC expressly conditioned the colour to be within the palette of Bath Stone, it takes on a particular importance. Neither sample truly represents the external elevation of the host building but the variation proposed is too far removed to be at all acceptable. In reality, the sample approved under the original planning application is also wrong but that particular ship has sailed and it is too late to recall it for another attempt that might produce a better match with the soon to be cleaned Bath Stone that will show at the back on either side of the extension.

It was unanimously agreed that the previously approved sample was vastly preferable to that being proposed in this application and should be the one to be used. It was the view of those voting that the proposed sample was too dark in colour when shaded and when not shaded was too highly reflective a finish to be considered acceptable. There was also a strong view expressed that this was more an attempt to return to something akin to the original and decisively refused colour. The likely visual impact in strong sunlight was also of particular concern to some.

We appreciate what the architect is trying to achieve here and both samples deliver his aims to some degree, though one more than the other. However, we believe that the already approved sample is more in line with the principles of visual homogeneity by being drawn from a colour palette that is more in keeping with the main building. It attempts to respect its surroundings, rather than trying to reflect its surroundings. This was the intention of the DCC when insisting on this condition for the original application and this is one of the key factors in assessing this application.

The insistence that the decision on this application should be taken so quickly, indeed a day ahead of the last day for public comment, is also of concern.

Consequently, Bath Heritage Watchdog objects to the variation proposed, and would prefer to see installed the ceramic colour which has already been approved under the original planning application.