



Bath Heritage Watchdog

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APPLICATION NUMBER: 12/04319/LBA

ADDRESS: 2 Brunel Square

PROPOSAL: Internal alterations to vault to provide fittings and layout
in connection with conversion to an artisan bakery and cafe

CASE OFFICER: Geoff Webber

DATE: 16 October 2012

COMMENT: OBJECTION

Bath Heritage Watchdog strongly objects to this application.

Bath Spa Station, c1840 forms an important part of the original and internationally significant Great Western Railway, one of the earliest established railway companies in England. The masterpiece is constructed to a design by the engineer and architect Isambard Kingdom Brunel, widely perceived as one of the most important transport engineers of the 19th century. It is listed Grade II* and is within the Bath Conservation Area and World Heritage Site. The Great Western Railway is also considered of national and international importance.

It is increasingly clear that a certain amount of detail relating to Brunel Square has already been determined, whether through application or condition discharges. Unfortunately it appears that not all such detail is publicly available or easily accessible. There should therefore be a requirement for a basic statement included with each application accurately detailing what already has consent and what is newly applied for to enable comprehensive assessment.

The conversion of arches and vaults within the station complex none of which were intended to be seen, automatically provides difficulties. Given that the rather tenuous justification for demolishing Brunel's original platform access ramp was that it would allow the public to see the vaults that were previously concealed, their size, internal spatial qualities and special architectural and historic interest has to be paramount and must be respected above any corporate aspirations.

Their opening up now provides an opportunity for the public to appreciate their inner beauty and if a proposed use cannot fit within these parameters then it has to be deemed an inappropriate use. It is therefore unfortunate that the arches have been marketed as a ‘food quarter’ (a use which seems at odds with the original concept of a transport interchange) and a use which is notoriously difficult to retrofit to listed structures if cooking takes place on the premises. Only extremely high quality works should be permitted as these initial applications will set a precedent for any future proposed works. We note that English Heritage has already raised strong concerns regarding works proposed.

Turning to this specific application we would make the following comments.

DOCUMENTATION

No photographs of the finger vaults in question have been provided. Given that the site is currently a building site and that an unauthorised site visit is not possible, it is considered that sufficient visual information should have been provided to allow the public to assess the potential impact and this application should not have been validated without this information.

SIGNAGE

The signage for this application is not objectionable. However, that is not to say that it is perfect. We do not support the use of vinyl lettering on listed buildings. We would suggest that the signage is traditionally signwritten to the glass. We question whether the child-like scribble of “bakery” would attract custom, and suggest a more conventional font. In addition we do not believe that the inclusion of the website and telephone number is necessary to the Brunel Square elevation and these should be removed from the application. Simplicity has to be the key to providing an appropriate solution for such a sensitive location, particularly when the absence of a SPD makes an area-wide standard difficult to arrange.

The proposed signage to Dorchester Street is unnecessary and should be removed. This area is immediately adjacent to the crossing of the dangerous exit from the bus station and nothing should be placed in this area to distract pedestrians.

We maintain our objection to illuminated signage within the conservation area. Brunel Square will be sufficiently illuminated to allow the various businesses to be highly visible and we therefore do not believe that additional illumination whether spotlight or internal to the signage is necessary. The glass frontages to the units will allow ample light levels for the signage to be seen without the addition of extra illumination. This is something which English Heritage has already raised in relation to a corresponding application. In addition with recent reports relating to issues with electricity provision in the coming years, sustainability needs to be a strong consideration and unnecessary illumination should not be permitted. Even “low energy” lighting uses energy that could be saved.

EXTERNAL WORKS

Mention is made within the Design & Access Statement of external furniture, yet no information has been given of this, the type, the design, the area to be utilised, etc. Given that these units will be in the main area used by travellers traversing in both directions between the bus station and the railway station, quite likely with heavy luggage and often with a child in a pushchair, this area must be kept completely clear to allow unimpeded access. Anything else would negate the claimed benefit from the removal of the ramp – the ease of access for travellers.

INTERNAL WORKS

Although it is appreciated that additions may well be reversible, this does not negate the need to respect the historic structure and for it to be ensured that no damage is caused. Unfortunately the proposals as submitted are considered to be highly detrimental.

We appreciate that food hygiene rules may require all surfaces to be washable and non-absorbent and where there are no ceilings for finishes to prevent the accumulation of dirt and to reduce condensation, the growth of moulds and the shedding of particles. This automatically raises issues in these particular structures where part of the special architectural and historic interest of the vaults is the attractive stonework. As stated above, the ability to retrofit a listed structure is therefore brought into question and if this use cannot be achieved without such damage then another use or another applicant has to be found.

Unfortunately no photographs pertinent to the proposed units have been provided (as mentioned previously). However there is no reason to believe that the stonework is any different to the other vaults.

It is proposed to install stainless steel cladding above the main counter and food preparation area. Whilst the need to have such a surface is understood, we cannot support its fixing to the interior of the vault which would cause damage to the stonework and would no doubt also involve the requirement for some sort of sealant to be used around the edges. Such units will need to be freestanding.

It is proposed to treat the internal stonework with Unibond Super PVA Adhesive Sealer & Primer to aid cleaning and prevent the shedding of stone and masonry particles. Again whilst the desirability is understood we do not consider it appropriate. Having done some brief research it would appear that this product is essentially intended for preparing a porous surface (such as the stonework) to accept another treatment such as plaster, wallpaper, etc. Nowhere in the information we have viewed does it make it clear that this product is intended to be used as a final surface treatment.

The product can be used neat as an adhesive, mixed with Portland cement/sand/water as a bonding agent for plaster or with water to provide a primer prior to further surface treatment. None of this appears to be applicable for the use provided here and the documentation does not indicate which method is to be used. In addition there is no indication as to whether the finish is clear or an opaque finish. We therefore cannot assess its suitability. Certainly anything which would obscure the stonework is extremely unsuitable.

The Design & Access Statements says '*Most sealants will prevent the ingress of water or other liquids but remain permeable to air allowing the stone to breathe*'. This is a general statement. The specification for this sealant does not state that it will allow the stonework to breathe and will not have an adverse impact on the historic fabric. If it prevents the stone from breathing the stone will deteriorate behind the sealed surface and by the time this deterioration become obvious significant damage will have occurred. Any treatment used must be at least as porous as limewash. Such structures need to breathe especially in areas where there is the possibility of high moisture content such as that proposed.

The cited example of Farrington Farm Shop is irrelevant. It is not a listed building and is therefore not subject to the same restrictions and scrutiny. Examples of where this process/product has been used elsewhere in listed buildings is required.

Although we understand the reasoning for the areas of lime render (though we cannot assess the requirement without the aforementioned photos), and do not necessarily object in principle, the use of Limelite is opposed. The specification provided states that the product includes Portland cement. Therefore this is a cementitious render which is not appropriate. Only a traditional lime render should be used.

An internal partition wall is proposed but it is stated that the exact location and dimensions cannot be given until the developer has finished the area. Under these circumstances, the impact cannot be assessed without the information. As this has the potential to affect the internal spatial quality of the vault this information must be provided for public assessment prior to determination and not secured under condition.

Although the air cooling system data has been provided, the positioning is not shown on the drawings and we therefore cannot assess whether this position is acceptable.

It is stated that a cement floor has already been installed by the developers. We cannot trace a permission for this inappropriate treatment. No information has been provided as to what the original flooring was and if this has been covered by concrete this is unacceptable. Without photos we have no way of confirming this. However, if a cement floor has been installed we are extremely disappointed as the original flooring should have been retained or at the very least Limecrete should have been used. These are historic structures and concrete will exacerbate any damp levels that may be prevalent.

No internal section drawings have been provided to assess the impact of the proposed internal works - shelving, tables, counters, etc and no information has been provided as to their fixings, etc.

No details of the proposed lighting, wall heaters, uplighters or bulkhead lights have been provided for assessment all of which could have a significant impact on the structure.

SUMMARY

The works, by virtue of the use of inappropriate materials and methods and the lack of information leaving considerable doubt as to what precisely is proposed are considered to be detrimental to the special architectural and historic interest of the building, adjacent listed buildings and the conservation area contrary to S16 and S72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Section 12 'Conserving & Enhancing the Historic Environment of the NPPF and Local Plan Policies BH2, BH6 and BH17 and must be refused in its current inadequate form.

The application should be withdrawn and specialist advice sought from the Local Authority specialist conservation officers to ensure more appropriate proposals are submitted when all the details are available.