

282.6/KS

1 February 2010

Kristian Kaminski
Conservation Adviser
Victorian Society
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by email only

Dear Kristian

Oriel College, Rhodes Building

I refer to your letter dated 6 January 2010 and subsequent letter to Oxford City Council regarding the Rhodes Building. This letter sets out the circumstances of our pre-application consultation with you, summarises the background information and responds to your comments.

When we contacted you in December 2009, it was to inform you of our intention to submit applications for planning and listed building consent for the Rhodes building on behalf of Oriel College. You asked for some drawings, which we sent, but these did not contain the supporting documentation or an explanation of the processes that have been undertaken over the last 2 years resulting in the proposals. Without this context your committee will not have been able to assess the proposals properly. As previously offered, we would be pleased to meet, show you around the building and explain our proposals to you.

A brief summary of background information

- In July 2008 a masterplan was commissioned by Oriel College to look at the medium term needs of the College. This highlighted the need for additional student accommodation on the main site. The Rhodes building was identified as the best location for additional residential units. A CD of the masterplan was sent in the post to you on 18 January 2010 for your information.
- The Disability Discrimination Act is a driving force behind future College projects, there is currently no publicly accessible WC on the main site and many other areas are difficult to access. The proposals for the Rhodes building would provide accessible student rooms, offices areas and other facilities such as a laundry accessible to all.
- The Rhodes building is in need of repair and refurbishment, the copper roof is at the end of its life and the building fabric is deteriorating. It needs a complete renewal of services and the removal of inappropriate alterations which have been carried out in the past.

We now respond to your comments, following the numbering in your letter:

1. Assessment of Architectural and Historic Significance

We think that the Rhodes Building is a strong and dominating building. However we do not think it is an exceptional example of Champneys' work, nor is it unique of its type and function nor particularly significant of its time. Nonetheless, it forms part of the history of the Oriel main site and should be respected for this together with its robust details, its architecture and integration with its surroundings.

4. Assessment of the Proposals

The Basil Champneys drawings referred to are stamped with Building Control 1909. This implies that the building was intended to be built to these drawings and are not early design sketches. We suggest that the reason for the change in the built form was probably due to cost. We know from correspondence that the building was considerably over budget and it is likely that the changes to the roof height and tower design were due to a cost cutting exercise during the building process.

Roof

The need for additional accommodation is demonstrated both by the College's statement of need the masterplan and explanation in the design and access statement.

The new roof is designed to minimise the impact of the additional storey, silhouetting the roof behind the gables to reduce the bulk of the roof. The design responds to the rhythm of the building. The view from St Mary's Tower is important and of primary consideration. From St Mary's Tower the view of the Oriel triangle is very colourful and the proposed roof reads well with this and is in keeping with the spirit of Oriel College. We propose that the material of the roof remains copper as existing. We have taken a conservation approach, making the new part of the building 'quietly' contemporary rather than copying the historic forms and features. The visual impact from the street would be minimal as can be seen by the sketch included in the design and access statement.

The proposals for the roof will alter the existing profile, however we do not believe that this will be harmful to the building or its surroundings.

Windows at ground floor to the High Street

Oxford City Council encourages visual permeability from the public realm. The High Street frontage at ground level presents a very closed and forbidding public face. The windows with their battered cills are more reminiscent of a fortress than a College and is an area of the design that doesn't seem to be completely resolved, possibly following the redesign from open loggia at the front of the College. Oriel College would also like to their staff to be able to see out. The proposal to lower the window and open up the arch, addresses both these requirements. The proposal takes its form from the south side ground floor windows which it mirrors.

A precedent for lowering the cills to ground floor windows can be seen on the next door building, at the Old Bank. This has been carried out in a sensitive way and is successful in creating visual permeability from the High Street.

In the light of this additional information we urge you to reconsider your comments. Unfortunately, you were unable to attend a meeting to explain the proposals to you in January. However as mentioned earlier we would be very pleased to show you the Rhodes building and explain our proposals to you at a time convenient to you.

Yours sincerely

Kate Sanders RIBA
Marcus Beale Architects

cc Katharine Owen, Conservation Officer, Oxford City Council
Gerald Inns, Master of Works, Oriel College.