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Dear William

The former Royal High School, Regent Road

I am writing following our meeting earlier this week where you, along with Mark Hopton of LDN Architects, outlined initial proposals from the newly-formed Royal High School Preservation Trust for relocating St Mary's Music School to the former Royal High School site.

You intend to convert the main (the original Thomas Hamilton school) building into a performance and teaching space with the western approach to the building undeveloped and new boarding accommodation and canteen within the eastern half of the site. As I understand it, this division of the site into semi-public and private space would allow the school to use the central debating hall for public concerts and teaching whilst maintaining the privacy and security required for a school within the eastern part of the site.

We understand that it is too early for you to have developed detailed architectural proposals for the site, but we are happy to make the following comments about the emerging scheme.

The site divides into three constituent parts; the western 'playground'; the main building; and the eastern part containing the gymnasium / classroom block etc. Taking these in turn:

Western area

We have always stressed the open aspect of the western 'playground' as central to the setting of the main building and its relationship with Calton Hill and St Andrew's House. We therefore welcome that there are no development plans for this area. We also welcome the reuse of the entrance lodge and, as discussed, consider there is scope to redevelop the later mid-C20th block and rebuild on the site at a similar scale if required.

Main building

The former Royal High School is an internationally-acknowledged masterpiece of the Greek Revival. That degree of importance means, consequently, that any alterations or additions will have to be carefully considered and justified in terms of their functional need and use.



In order to maintain the special interest of the building, limit harmful interventions and enable its proper repair and conservation, we have previously indicated that, provided it was justified, redevelopment of the eastern side of the site may be possible.

Although, the building's primary façade is that to Regent Road, the other views and facades are carefully composed, including the north face of the main hall with its fine pediment and pilasters. As that elevation contained the principal everyday entrance to the building, and is also highly visible from Calton Hill, this is clearly not a building where an entirety of thought was directed to the front elevation. Although we appreciate the issues in successfully using a building that relies on interconnecting rooms rather than internal corridors we have concerns with an approach that would fill in the majority of the north face of the building with new development. Having said this, we consider there is scope for some intervention and new build, if it can be justified, to enable a viable use for the main building. Otherwise, we see no significant issues with your intended uses for the interior and would welcome the proposed restoration works and re-opening up of the central door under the portico.

Eastern area

As above, we regard the eastern part of the site, which contains the classroom block, gymnasium and other ancillary structures as an area where development could take place, provided this was justified and part of a wider repair and conservation-based scheme for the main building. Although the site's buildings are covered by one listing the main block is clearly the most important building on the site, and its sensitive reuse must be the first priority. Provided there is a SHEP justification for the loss of the classroom block we would not object to its replacement with a block of similar height, but less impact. We would have a similar view on the replacement of the ancillary buildings on the southern boundary.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have no concerns with the principle of reusing the site as a music school. It appears to offer a good fit for the building with the subdivision, from west to east, of the site into semi-public, and scholastic use whilst keeping open the arc of key views of the building. Provided the loss of the classroom block can be justified by the repair and sensitive use of the Hamilton building the impact on the site, either side of the Hamilton block is comparable or even improved from the current situation. Our one concern will be the treatment of the north face of the Hamilton block, but consider there is scope for intervention.

Yours sincerely

Steven Robb

Heritage Management Team Leader (HB) East