

Application Number: 10/04926/FUL

Address:

Herman Miller Uk
Lower Bristol Road
Bath BA2 3ER

Proposal:

Change of use from B2 to A1 Foodstore and 3no. A1 bulky goods units

Comments: submitted at 20/12/2010

On very close balance Bath Heritage Watchdog regretfully has to object to this application.

The Herman Miller building is included on the statutory list at Grade II. It lies outside the designated Conservation Area (although adjacent to it) and is within the World Heritage Site. It was built in 1966/7 and was the first building in Britain to use the Mero Space Frame technology. Although in terms of Bath's history is it young, it nevertheless forms part of its industrial heritage and is recognised for its groundbreaking design. It is regarded as a building at risk.

This is the latest in a succession of applications relating to the future of this important building. Whilst we fully support the principle of the application, the restoration and reuse of the building, there are aspects of the application which require clarification or with which we are not entirely happy. We believe these aspects are easy and quick to address.

ALTERATIONS TO THE LISTED BUILDING

The proposals are broadly similar to those which already have consent. However, there are some aspects which have been included in this application which cause us concern.

The proposed subdivision of the section for the bulky goods retailers is amended. That which has consent divides the area in a north-south direction with the divisions being as close to mid way between the mero frame supporting columns, creating three units of roughly the same area. That which is now proposed creates one north-south unit and two east-west units, all of varying sizes. Consequently one of the partitions proposed is close to a row of the supporting columns and it is considered that this will adversely impact on the spatial qualities of the area and views of the roof structure. No justification has been given for this change in configuration and after careful consideration if subdivision is to be permitted we would expect that the previously consented configuration is retained. If variations in unit size are required, this should be possible by adjusting the positions of the dividing walls.

The change in configuration also necessitates the inclusion of a unit entrance to the eastern elevation. Although the removal of the loading bay entrance and the restoration to the original elevation is supported, we do not feel that including a unit entrance to this elevation is necessary. Retention of the original subdivision configuration means this is not required and keeps all the entrances to the rear of the building. In addition no detailed drawings of the proposed entrance have been included with the documentation in order to fully assess the impact on the listed building. No doubt if this is the main entrance to the unit in question it will necessitate window manifestations, signage, lighting and other visual clutter. We do not believe this is necessary and would affect the original lines and the approaching views of the listed building.

There appears to be additional full length glazing, additional to that previously consented, proposed to the east elevation. There is no justification given for this and we do not believe that this is necessary. We would prefer that the west, east and south elevations remain as close to the original configuration as possible ie glazing above the grey cladding panels.

We are extremely pleased to see that the pyramid rooflights have been omitted (though it is noted that this was previously agreed in condition sign off). However, no information has been provided with respect to the proposed roof layout and whether any conservation rooflights are proposed, or what ventilation ducting through the roof is proposed.

No details have been provided of external vents or flues, their appearance, location and colour finish.

No details have been provided of service runs, internal lighting, sprinklers etc and their impact on the important Mero Space Frame, nor of air conditioning units if these are to be installed.

No drawings have been provided for the proposed doors for each unit, nor details of any internal lobbies that may be required to satisfy fire regulations.

The proposed use of Marley Eternit Textura colour grey (P206), Cefil roofing membrane in dark grey colour and Crittal W2 in RAL 9006 (matt metallic colour) as previously consented in condition sign off is supported.

No details are provided of the proposed construction of the partitioning. The Design & Access Statements says '*Partitions to all the units will be in blockwork which will terminate at the underside of the ceiling, similar to the existing blockwork wall*'. This does not detail what form the partitioning will take above the frame and how it is to be achieved without adversely impacting on the Mero Space Frame. Sectional drawings are required to show how the inserted dividing walls relate to the existing roof structure and floor. We would prefer that this is glass so that the Mero frame can be viewed from all sides. One of the distinctive features of the Mero Space Frame roof was the wide expanse that could be achieved with minimal support, therefore if partitioning is to be accepted we would request that glazing is utilised above the blockwork to help maintain the openness and views of the Mero frame. In all cases this should be carefully erected to avoid damage and without cutting through or removing sections of the existing roof structure.

If repairs/restoration of any damaged parts of the Mero Space Frame are to be carried out, we would request that the advice of the Senior Conservation Officer is sought to ensure they are appropriate.

As suggested previously, we would hope that the applicants would consider the installation of an information board to help the understanding of the building's construction, history and importance, in particular its Mero Space Frame construction which will bring the importance and significance of the building to the attention of the people using it.

SITE LAYOUT

The inclusion of the riverside walkway clearly addresses one of the key issues raised with the previous applications. The proposals are considered acceptable and will help soften the hard landscaping of the car park.

We note that railings are proposed to the northern boundary and a section of Fieldings Road. No details have been provided of their design. Whilst we have no objection to the principle of the railings either details of the proposed design need to be provided as part of the application or this aspect should be conditioned.

The original landscape concept would appear to have been an open grass area so that when viewed from the road the building was located in an open setting. We are therefore pleased to see that the previously proposed timber fencing to the southern boundary has been omitted and that the grass verge is to be retained. This forms an important part of the setting of the listed building. We are also pleased to see the inclusion of a grass verge to the front edge of the additional car park. Although not shown on the site layout plan we would encourage planting of shrubs (not trees which would block views of the listed building) to soften the hard landscaping and to enhance the setting of the listed building.

It is noted that it is still proposed for the cycle store to be sited on the western elevation. We remain concerned at this and would request that this is relocated to the rear of the building, perhaps even installing stands at either end at the rear of the building to reduce the impact.

We note that there are no landscaping proposals included for the existing substation and would request that this be considered to lessen the impact.

LIGHTING

As with previous applications our concerns regarding the external lighting remain. Given that the height of the building is around 5m to the roof level, it is considered that the proposed height of the lighting columns (8m) is excessive, even allowing for the difference in land levels and would therefore have a detrimental impact on resident amenity. It is stated that a hooded design for the lights themselves is to be utilised but with the height of the columns it is questioned as to their benefit at such a height. It is also unclear as to the precise design for the lights, especially given that the majority of the lighting statement specification is in German. There is no indication of where the lights are to be located and how many there are to be. These issues were pointed out previously and it is disappointing that they have not been addressed within this application.

SIGNAGE

Although not forming part of this actual application, it should be noted that Listed Building Consent will be required and we consider that any signage should be kept to an absolute minimum and that corporate designs, especially those in garish colours, will not necessarily be considered acceptable. The one advantage that the applicants have in this respect is that the Herman Miller building is a local landmark and its location known by all.

PRINCIPLE OF CHANGE OF USE

Generally the best way of securing the upkeep of historic buildings and areas is to keep them in active use. For the great majority this must mean economically viable uses if they are to survive, and new, and even continuing, uses will often necessitate some degree of adaptation. The range and acceptability of possible uses must therefore usually be a major consideration when the future of listed buildings or buildings in conservation areas is in question.

The Herman Miller building has been languishing for many years, with a continuing industrial use clearly not forthcoming. Therefore an alternative has to be considered. The building was designed as a flexible working space, therefore the alteration to retail, especially for bulky goods, is considered as acceptable within certain parameters. Listed Building Consent has previously been granted and is therefore acceptable in conservation terms.

It was clear from the public consultations that were carried out that the proposal for a Lidl foodstore was strongly supported. Twerton has always retained its historic 'village' origins, even though it is now part of the main City of Bath. It is therefore considered that the Lidl store, due to its size and range, will predominantly serve this catchment area plus the student accommodation at Waterside Court and Charlton Court. It is therefore considered that this would ensure a long term use for the building.

One of the previous issues raised as a barrier to the granting of the change of use was the possible competition to the city centre, and more especially Southgate. It is not considered that this would be the case. Southgate has morphed into an expensive fashion retail centre offering little to local residents wanting everyday goods. The individual units are small and do not lend themselves to bulky goods retailers. In addition the empty units now emerging within the city centre are also not of a size suitable for bulky goods retailers nor are they accessible by car, something which will intensify with the future public realm proposals for additional pedestrianisation of the city centre.

TRANSPORT

Transport issues are generally outside the remit of Bath Heritage Watchdog, however the inclusion of additional parking to the east of the site has implications for the setting of the listed building.

It is noted that previously planning permission has been granted for an office building and associated parking. This has now lapsed. Bath currently has a surfeit of office buildings, a lot of which have remained empty for years, and those which have been granted permission in recent years show no signs of being built. It is therefore considered that additional parking is a far better use of the ground.

Any bulky goods retailer will require parking adjacent to the store. The additional parking that is now proposed is considered acceptable in terms of the impact on the listed building and indeed may be considered to improve the setting by providing better views and by softening the locality by the inclusion of planting. A large office block as that previously proposed would have an adverse impact on the listed building.

CURRENT CONDITION

Over the past few years the overall condition of the building has declined through water ingress, unauthorised access and vandalism. The succession of listed building and delayed planning applications over the past 2-3 years gives a clearly documented illustration of the rapid deterioration in the condition of this listed building.

Whilst we fully support the aims of the application, it is unfortunate that we have to object to it. Most of the points raised in our comment have been raised previously and we therefore consider that the applicants are not helping matters in submitting an application which is severely short on detail.

We remind all parties involved of their responsibilities to ensure that it is not allowed to deteriorate further. The current severe weather will no doubt be exacerbating the condition. The existence of a listed building in such a perilous condition within the World Heritage Site is wholly unacceptable. We would urge all parties to redouble their efforts in order to rectify this position. If our concerns above are addressed, we would be happy to reconsider our position.

The current proposals, by virtue of inappropriate alterations, and lack of detailed information leaving considerable doubt as to what is proposed, is considered contrary to S16 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, PPS5: Planning & the Historic Environment and Local Plan Policy BH2, cannot be supported in its present format.