

Cobh Library E-hub

Part 8 planning for the conversion of part of the ground floor plan, underneath the Main Library, into an E-Centre.

Status

The building is located within an ACA- **Cobh ACA**.

The building is listed on the Record of Protected Structures **RPS ID 1,896** (Detached thirteen-bay two-storey town hall, built c. 1855 now library).

The building is listed as of regional significance on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage **NIAH 20827287: Cobh Town Hall and Courthouse**

Policy

County Development Plan Objectives HE 16-14: Record of Protected Structures

- a) The identification of structures for inclusion in the Record will be based on criteria set out in the Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2011).
- b) Extend the Record of Protected Structures in order to provide a comprehensive schedule for the protection of structures of special importance in the County during the lifetime of the Plan as resources allow.
- c) Seek the protection of all structures within the County, which are of special architectural, historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural, scientific, social or technical interest. In accordance with this objective, a Record of Protected Structures has been established and is set out in Volume Two Heritage and Amenity, Chapter 1 Record of Protected Structures.
- d) Ensure the protection of all structures (or parts of structures) contained in the Record of Protected Structures.
- e) Protect the curtilage and attendant grounds of all structures included in the Record of Protected Structures.
- f) Ensure that development proposals are appropriate in terms of architectural treatment, character, scale, and form to the existing protected structure and not detrimental to the special character and integrity of the protected structure and its setting.
- g) Ensure high quality architectural design of all new developments relating to or which may impact on structures (and their settings) included in the Record of Protected Structures.
- h) Promote and ensure best conservation practice through the use of specialist conservation professionals and craft persons.
- i) In the event of a planning application being granted for development within the curtilage of a protected structure, that the repair of a protected structure is prioritised in the first instance i.e. the proposed works to the protected structure should occur, where appropriate, in the first phase of the development to prevent endangerment, abandonment and dereliction of the structure.

HE 16-18: Architectural Conservation Areas

Conserve and enhance the special character of the Architectural Conservation Areas included in this Plan. The special character of an area includes its traditional building stock, material finishes, spaces, streetscape, shopfronts, landscape and setting. This will be achieved by;

- (a) Protecting all buildings, structures, groups of structures, sites, landscapes and all other features considered to be intrinsic elements to the special character of the ACA from demolition and non[1]sympathetic alterations.
- (b) Promoting appropriate and sensitive reuse and rehabilitation of buildings and sites within the ACA and securing appropriate infill development.
- (c) Ensure new development within or adjacent to an ACA respects the established character of the area and contributes positively in terms of design, scale, setting and material finishes to the ACA.
- (d) Protect structures from demolition and non sympathetic alterations.
- (e) Promoting high quality architectural design within ACAs.
- (f) Seek the repair and re-use of traditional shopfronts and where appropriate, encourage new shopfronts of a high quality architectural design.
- (g) Ensure all new signage, lighting advertising and utilities to buildings within ACAs are designed, constructed and located in such a manner they do not detract from the character of the ACA.
- (h) Protect and enhance the character and quality of the public realm within ACAs. All projects which involve works within the public realm of an ACA shall undertake a character assessment of the said area which will inform a sensitive and appropriate approach to any proposed project in terms of design and material specifications. All projects shall provide for the use of suitably qualified conservation architects/ designers.
- (i) Protect and enhance the character of the ACA and the open spaces contained therein. This shall be achieved through the careful and considered strategic management of all signage, lighting, utilities, art works/pieces/paintings, facilities etc to protect the integrity and quality of the structures and spaces within each ACA. (j) Ensure the protection and reuse of historic street finishes, furniture and features which contribute to the character of the ACA.

County Development Plan Objectives HE 16-15: Protection of Structures on the NIAH

Protect where possible all structures which are included in the NIAH for County Cork, that are not currently included in the Record of Protected Structures, from adverse impacts as part of the development management functions of the County.

Built Heritage Assessment

Site

The building is set at the north of Casement square with the classically influenced façade dominating the immediate environs and serving as an important key building within the town. The former town hall is detached, but through scale of surrounding buildings and narrowness of space either side it merges into what appears to be a continuous street line. Standing thirteen-bays long and two-storey high, the hall was built c. 1852. The south elevation is governed by the three-bay pedimented central breakfront with integral carriage arch flanked by pedestrian arches. West of the arch, a flight of

limestone steps accesses first floor of the west wing. At east there are some indications of alterations to ground floor opens suggestive of a former door here, however today the row of windows looking out to open public space adds to the character and potential of the square here. I note that the public realm design for this area has won an RIAI award. This area of cobh is certainly culturally and socially vibrant and the nature and charm of this building forms part of that atmosphere. Architectural detail of note include moulded render cornices and brackets, ashlar limestone pediment, plaque, quoins and ashlar limestone walls to breakfront, repeating round arched openings and timber sliding sash windows, Ashlar limestone sill courses, voussoirs, impost courses and plinth courses. Square-headed openings under arch, east and west elevations with overlights over timber panelled double-leaf doors.

Today the building is divided into a county library on the west and Cobh tourist office and chamber officers to the east. The only area of the interior of the building impacted by the current proposed development is the east wing at ground floor. The room is used for storage associated with the library at present, with painted plaster walls, concrete floors to main block and tiled floors to a more recent rear addition, painted plaster ceiling with truss line detail forming recessed panels. The ceiling is supported by circular plan painted metal piers on painted plinths. The space is dominated by windows in the rear elliptical arched recesses (north wall, doors with overlights). The rear block of this area, a flat roofed extension, shows significant damp and includes some inappropriate materials (cement block walls etc). The impact assessment report takes into account the rest of the building as a basis for potential further works in future.

Submission

Cork County Council are establishing a series of E-Centres (Digital Hubs) across the county. The proposed centre in Cobh is located within a building protected though listing on the record of protected structures. The only area of the building impacted by the current proposed development is the east wing at ground floor. In support of the proposal an Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment has been prepared by Oisín Creagh of Foureem Design Architecture- a Grade 1 conservation architect. The report includes a survey of the building as it stands, an assessment of potential conservation needs for the building in future, and an assessment of the proposed development. The report is competent and appropriate to the nature of the building.

It is proposed that the development will include a work hub, new toilets, cellular closed office and open plan desk space.

My Assessment

The proposal has little impact on the building, other than providing for works to the rear modern flat roofed block which will further integrate this area into the main block and will see improved toilet facilities here. The area being fitted out has few original features. The columns being among the most apparent of these- these have been retained in the proposed new layouts.

The Impact Assessment report makes a series of suggestions which should also be integrated into the proposal for the E-hub (note many of the below are necessary for the proposals, others relate to upgrades to improve the space to enhance the proposal) – see recommendations below.

Recommendations

I am satisfied that the proposed development can be achieved in a manner that protects and retains the character of the protected structure. The following recommendations are offered;

The rear flat roofs need to be repaired. Rainwater outlets are blocked, and the roof has some vegetation ingress.

Issues with walls to interior (some dry lined) need to be addressed; it will be necessary to improve ventilation of walls and restore the natural balance of the traditionally built walls. The dry lining should be removed and walls recovered in insulated lime render, cork or Calcium Silicate Board to improve the thermal performance and allow breathability of the fabric.

Walls to interior that are not lined need to be assessed and proposals made to address damp issues. This may be a reflexion of inappropriate cement based renders to the exterior of the walls. If so the render should be removed and replaced with lime based renders.

Stone plinth cement pointing should be removed, joints raked out, and repointed in appropriate lime and sand mortars. The AHIA report suggests that this would potentially improve any 'rising damp' concerns.

Painting (where necessary)– breathable paint to be used to interior and exterior.

Proposed layouts

I note that there are two proposals for the site, presented as Figure 85 and 86 in the AHIA. The proposal under figure 85 is appropriate from a conservation standpoint. The addition of wheelchair access to the façade is inappropriate and unnecessary given the extant access available in the door under the arch.

The proposal entails the creation of several smaller private office areas. Additional specification should be provided regarding how this will be achieved- will these be partitioned off with half walls or will walls reach ceiling? will they be pod-style rooms with space over? The integration of such small rooms into a space with considerable ceiling heights will be design challenge that needs additional consideration and clarification. In terms of room numbers, the layout proposed under figure 86 in the AHIA is preferable as it has a cleaner less cluttered effect on the overall space.

Specifications for all the above should be provided for approval of the heritage unit.