



L B Camden application ref. 2025/5094/P - British Museum: Visitor Welcome Programme

The London & Middlesex Archaeological Society (LAMAS) promotes London's archaeology, local history, and historic buildings. The LAMAS Historic Buildings & Conservation Committee reviews applications for listed building consent and seeks to ensure a sustainable future for vital aspects of London's built heritage

The British Museum is both a building and an institution of national and international renown and significance. Smirke's buildings are majestic and austere – the grandest and most imposing Neo-classical architecture in the country - housing an institution of international significance. The entrance courtyard and its boundaries are an integral part of the original design and the importance of the courtyard's formal symmetry and open plan as the setting for the buildings have been recognised and maintained over the 200 years since its design.

Yet the Museum are now proposing to radically change the courtyard by inserting a building, contoured landscaping and an array of fixed barriers that break its symmetry and domesticate its deliberately austere impact. We have studied the proposals and in particular endorse the comments of the Georgian Group and Martin Randall: like them and others, we have concluded that the proposals are unacceptable and should be refused on the grounds of the harm they would cause to the ensemble and to the Bloomsbury Conservation Area.

In more detail, **we object** firstly to the proposed visitor entry routes. These are confused and are not clearly set out in the application.

In the south courtyard, the visitor entrance route intended by Smirke's design is along the central axis of the composition; entering through the main gates on Great Russell Street, across the courtyard, up the steps into the portico and thence into the building, allowing visitors to experience the full power of the architecture. The application proposes two lines of barriers across this central axis and for everyone to be sent off to the west to be steered by and queue between more barriers before entering the security pavilion. It will be impossible for a bag-less visitor with a valid timed ticket to simply walk in along the axis of Smirke's design as intended. This obstruction of the intended route is repeated for visitors leaving the Museum, and the proposals leave it unclear how they will get out unless the Museum has security staff standing by the two barriers, in all weathers, to let people out! These proposals are unacceptable.

The proposals for the north courtyard, although denying the intended simple entry route from the pavement across the narrow courtyard to the doors, appear to be better resolved as exiting visitors do appear to have a separate route from the doors to the pavement, but requiring yet more barriers. Nowhere does the application state that the proposals will require **all visitors to pass scanners** before reaching the buildings, yet that is what the drawings show. This is not required at many other national institutions.

The plan of the north forecourt proposes an entrance ramp passing the security pavilion on its south: however just one drawing in the Design and Access Statement shows a barrier across this ramp which will prevent people from bypassing the pavilion and require everyone to enter it to pass a scanner. This barrier is not shown on the main set of drawings of the north forecourt. So the design suggests that some visitors will be able to bypass the pavilion, but in practice this will be prevented.

No provision has been made for separating visitors who need to have a bag checked from those who weren't, so that the Museum will require everyone to book a timed entry but, whether or not they are carrying bags and whether or not they are there at the allotted time, to then queue to pass through a barrier of scanners and a bag-check in a security pavilion.

Guiding all visitors along the proposed entry routes will require numerous barriers, and in some cases, staff to control them in all weathers. These barriers will clutter up the courtyards, particularly damagingly so in the south courtyard, and prevent visitors experiencing the proper force and grandeur of the architectural ensemble. Secondly we object to the two new security (bag-check) pavilions: these are a feeble and inadequate response to the challenge of their locations.

The Design and Access Statement professes to find the proposed pavilions 'characterful'. There are precedents for placing truly characterful smaller buildings within a space dominated by much larger formal buildings, whereas the ambition for these pavilions appears to be to build something vague and indistinct. It would be far more acceptable to place a casket-like building with its own, but contrasting, strong form and detail into these spaces; such as is achieved by John Foster's Oratory Chapel in front of Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral, the tiny 11th century Church of St. Wojciech in front of Kraków's Rynek, and the Pyramid at the Louvre. These examples hold their own with self-contained dignity and presence despite, for Liverpool and Kraków, being on a much smaller scale than the buildings that dominate their surroundings

Both proposed pavilions have mono-pitch roofs with the taller end adjacent to a garden, which looks attractive on plan. However, security concerns apparently require the south courtyard pavilion to be largely closed off from its surroundings, leaving only its east wall glazed, though passage through that wall into the adjacent garden will not be possible except for staff. Its other elevations are to be panelled with curved stainless steel panels which dimly reflect their surroundings and so, on the rendered elevations included in the Design and Access Statement, the building is shown as mistily indistinct as if it would rather not be there at all.

Although the north security pavilion houses the same functions as the south, it does not apparently need to be similarly closed off and so is fully-glazed, though the view of and passage into the adjacent garden is to be obstructed by display shelves. The form, material and detail of the pavilions are an inadequate response to their context: if truly necessary they should be self-possessed and capable of holding their own close to the unusually powerful existing buildings.

The application should be refused on the grounds of:

(a) The obstruction of the visitor entry and exit routes intended by the original design of the buildings, and the failure to provide adequate visitor exit routes and

(b) The harm they will cause within the curtilage and to the view of the southern elevation of the Museum from both Great Russell and Museum Streets and to the setting and significance of a listed building of international renown.

Vicki Fox (Hon. Secretary)
LAMAS – Historic Buildings & Conservation Committee

9 February 2026