

Parliamentary questions

18 October 2019

For the first in a series of articles on the [Palace of Westminster's restoration and renewal](#) , Built Environment Journal spoke to the programme's design director and architecture lead.

Q: Why was the programme initiated?

Andrew Piper: The programme was prompted by a need for a fundamental mechanical and electrical (M&E) refurbishment of the building – most of its infrastructure dates back to the 1950s, and some of it even to 1888. It was also recognised that by 2020, around half of the Palace of Westminster would be at risk of catastrophic failure. So if you are going to replace all those systems and you need to get access to the areas behind the oak wall panels, then it also makes sense to do the conservation work at the same time. Billions of pounds will be spent to make the palace fit for purpose for the next 150 years, both in terms of accessibility and to ensure it can work as a modern office building, so there has been, and continues to be, engagement with the members of both [Houses of Parliament](#) and other building users about what they want.

Q: Can you outline the programme's different projects?

AP: There are three key projects. The first is the House of Commons decant in the mid-2020s into a temporary chamber in the former Department of Health building Richmond House, which is next to the Ministry of Defence on Whitehall. This building came into the parliamentary estate recently on the basis that we needed a secure line around the House of Commons, and it will become the temporary chamber as well as being used for MPs' offices and staff accommodation. But the site will need substantial redevelopment – not least to accommodate the chamber, which is a significant structure to find space for in any existing building. The second project is the House of Lords decant into the nearby [Queen Elizabeth II \(QEII\) Centre](#) , which is currently a conference facility. This will involve similar works to include the chamber, committee rooms, staff accommodation and administration so they are fit for purpose, plus all the work to make the building secure for the House of Lords. Once the palace is empty we will be able to start the third project, which is mechanical and engineering works and all the essential conservation to make the Palace of Westminster fit for the next 150 years in terms of ventilation, accommodation and accessibility.

Q: Who are the main stakeholders on the project?

AP: On the parliamentary estate the stakeholders are the many parties who run those buildings, including the in-house service teams responsible for maintenance and fire safety, for example. We are now establishing long-term governance for the programme. Key decisions will be made through a sponsor body that will come into being once legislation has been passed by both houses; the board of this sponsor body will act as the single client accountable to Parliament. The project members themselves will be going back to the two houses once the programme has been finalised in a couple of years' time.

Q: How have planning authorities or building control been involved?

AP: The [Northern Estate programme](#), including the House of Commons decant, involves the refurbishment of a group of buildings from the 18th to the 21st centuries next to the Palace of Westminster. Most of these are listed and of considerable heritage value, and are already used by around 175 MPs, their staff and the staff of the House of Commons. This programme is many years ahead of the other projects, and has been working with [Westminster City Council](#) and [Historic England](#) for a number of years to prepare a planning application for the entire programme, including Richmond House. We have just started work on the House of Lords decant and had our first pre-application consultation with the council and Historic England. The brief for the palace has not been compiled yet, so we are not even at the stage of a discussion with these agencies, but the impact on the surrounding areas will I am sure lead to specific requirements from the council.

Q: Can you describe the project management and design team roles?

Julian Flannery: There are two teams, including a number of consultants such as the multidisciplinary design practice BDP; it has been working for a number of years with subconsultants including structural engineers Alan Baxter Associates. Then we have Jacobs, which is providing project managers and cost consultants. The BDP team itself comprises around 100 people, and there are probably another 150 including all the in-house team, making around 250 in total.

Q: Are any of the buildings listed, and if so has a conservation plan been carried out for them?

JF: The Palace of Westminster is grade I listed and, because of the way listing works, this applies to everything in the palace, even the offices where the press are housed. Many parts of the palace are of incredible historical importance, including the Victorian interior designed by Augustus Pugin ? among the greatest Gothic revival architecture in the world ? plus medieval designs in Westminster Hall and the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft. The conservation plan for the palace originally put together in 2007 has recently been reissued and is hundreds of pages long, going into great detail. In a building of this size and complexity there is a huge number of issues. It has always been a working building, constantly evolving through the thousand years since the original palace was built, so it is important we get the balance right by conserving what is already there and managing any change.

The palace is one of the most documented buildings in the country

Q: What was the existing as-built information like?

JF: The palace is one of the most documented buildings in the country. This includes around 3,000 of the original drawings from the office of Sir Charles Barry, the chief architect of the palace, which are stored at the [National Archives](#) in Kew, while around 10,000 from the late Victorian period to the 1980s are available in the [Historic England archive](#) in Swindon. These drawings are not well catalogued, so a major part of the project is to extract all the information and put that into a Revit model. This will involve many hours of review.

We have a full-time archivist and historian at the palace who has a huge role to play in interpreting the drawings. We also have all the electronic information from the 1980s onwards, and have undertaken one of the country's largest point-cloud building surveys. We have been checking all this to create a highly detailed model of the palace, and are also doing a lot of new surveys ? around 30 currently, of all types, looking at the condition of the building fabric in every aspect. Working around Parliament can take quite a long time, as a lot has to be done when the building is quiet; but it is important that we get as much done in the first few years as possible with the existing building to find out where it doesn't work.

Q: What is the programme schedule?

AP: By the end of this year we hope to have a clearer idea of the schedule, and as part of that work we would then look at timescales. We are planning to start the works themselves in the mid-2020s. There are planning issues in moving the House of Lords, so the planning application brief for the QEII Centre is critical. There is then a 2-year construction phase for that building to make sure it is operating correctly. The timeline for this, which involves working with planning procurement, takes the project up to the mid-2020s. This is the point at which we can decant the palace, and there is a similar process in the Northern Estate to allow Richmond House to be rebuilt to purpose. The parliamentary resolution on the restoration agreed by both houses in early 2018 set out that the project would be managed by the sponsor board, and that the board has the authority to contract the essential M&E and conservation works. But as the resolution only included one paragraph with specific design requirements it needs to be expanded substantially. At a later stage, we will have far more assurance on the project cost as well as a risk-benefit analysis, and then both houses will approve the programme. It is very difficult to pin down a strategy as we haven't yet defined exactly what the project brief is, so it is hard to engage with the stakeholders and get legislation through. We always uncover things that we didn't expect to find. We can reduce risk substantially when working on the building by shutting it down. In the meantime, we have to maintain an operational building alongside a construction site, and the risks associated with this are huge. The risk of fire will probably increase during the works, but the project will enable the implementation of a long-term strategy in this regard. All the risks associated with a heritage building are magnified with this building as well. Contractually there are penalties for late completion, but we are not currently at the point of appointing contractors as we haven't yet started procurement. We are presently at RIBA stage 1 for the House of Lords decant, while the Northern Estate programme is at RIBA stage 3.

Q: What is the programme budget?

AP: We haven't yet set the budget ? we will start to come up with an indicative budget by the end of this year. The final budget won't be set until we go back to both Houses of Parliament in 1 or 2 years' time.

The building's original design is still fit for purpose, and there are not many other Victorian buildings that still function as well as they were intended to when they were first built

Q: Are there any particular challenges presented by the buildings?

JF: A key challenge in the palace is accessibility. The present building was completed in the 1860s, before the first elevator had been invented, so any lifts have been retrofitted into corridors, stairwells or ventilation shafts, and the only one in the entire palace that meets all the regulations is a very small glass lift in the gift shop. All the others are too

small and the controls are in the wrong place, so getting access around the building is a terrible problem; BDP has calculated that only 12% of the floor area of the palace has compliant step-free access. Another challenge is building services, which again have been added to incrementally, particularly since the 1950s when the Commons chamber was rebuilt. Now we can strip the additional layers back to start again, and create a services infrastructure that can be replaced and upgraded in future.

AP: In the 1950s, a huge amount of asbestos was introduced into the building for lagging pipes, insulating ducts and provision of fire-stopping; the identification and removal of this will be a major part of the programme, as will coming up with a long-term fire strategy for the palace that addresses the issues around concealed voids and shafts. An absolutely essential requirement will be that the programme finally provides adequate property protection from fire. It could be another 15 years before the palace reopens, and creating a space where people can work in the 2030s will be another challenge, so we have been talking to stakeholders this year about how we can make flexible a building that is not inherently flexible.

JF: The building's original design is still fit for purpose, though, and there are not many other Victorian buildings that still function as well as they were intended to when they were first built ? maybe railway stations, but most Victorian buildings such as hospitals failed many decades ago.

It is a unique building ... it is very easy to make assumptions and not understand the complexity

Q: What works are planned for the rest of this year?

JF: The key task is to finalise the initial project brief, so we have been doing a lot of consultation with people who manage and use the buildings, including MPs and peers. Other stakeholders, particularly those who operate and manage the building, as well as business areas such as catering and security, have provided a huge amount of detail about how the building currently works. It is a unique building. BDP has spent a lot of time learning how Parliament works both as a building and as an institution. It is very easy to make assumptions and not understand the complexity.

AP: We expect Parliament will pass the bill establishing the governance of the restoration and renewal programme by the end of this year, and the sponsor board will have finalised the brief while the decant design will be approaching completion.

Andrew Piper is design director and Julian Flannery is architecture lead of the [Palace of Westminster Restoration and Renewal Programme](#)

Further information

- Related competencies include: [Conservation and restoration](#) , [Design and specification](#)
- This feature is taken from the [RICS Built Environment Journal](#) (September/October 2019)
- Related categories: [Conservation and restoration](#) , [Risk management on conservation projects](#) , [Heritage issues](#)