

ASCR Committee position on the Bloomsbury Masterplan

The present ASCR:

The Academic Staff Common Room, located in the Wilkins Building Housman Room, is comprised of a lounge area of 250m² and a bar area of 110m². Over the last three years, ASCR members have invested ~£100,000 in refurbishment and improvements to the Housman Room, has actively recruited staff members eligible to join, and has increased the number of guests allowed from 3 to 6 per member. Thus the ASCR is able to offer its members and the wider UCL community:

- A hub of UCL collegiality, a meeting place for academic and non-academic staff from all faculties, departments and administrative divisions, away from students and appropriate for semi-confidential business
- A location near the centre of UCL, accessible to the majority of the College community, appropriate for entertaining important visitors, alumni, potential donors and colleagues
- A large room where different conversations can take place alongside each other in what is truly a *common room*, contributing to communication and contact across all disciplines and departments both by arrangement and serendipitously
- A meeting space for College societies, departments and individual staff members, conference over-spill, informal post-seminar conversations and social gatherings after hours and at weekends, as an alternative to College's over-subscribed bookable rooms
- A venue for talks, displays and concerts, including orchestral concerts, with audiences of between 40 and 100
- Catering and bar facilities, Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 8.00pm
- A reading room offering a wide range of newspapers and journals

The Bloomsbury Masterplan:

We recognise that the Bloomsbury Masterplan may offer an opportunity to consider factors that could improve the overall facilities available to ASCR members: more floor space, improved catering facilities, improved security, a better vista, proximity to toilets or provision of direction notices, accommodation for visitors.

The current version of the UCL Estates Masterplan designates the ground floor of the Wilkins Building for use by the Library and Special Collections, with large areas of working space for students. The Housman Room and the Provost's Office would be required for these changes. It has been proposed that ASCR relocates to 25-26 Gordon Square, the two houses adjoining the "Beach" site next to the Bloomsbury Theatre and overlooking Gordon Square. As part of the plans, the Beach site would be occupied by a new building containing catering facilities, and lifts that would service the Gordon Square houses.

The two houses in Gordon Square have a combined area of 600m² over four floors. It seems the two houses have floors at different levels; that and various planning and structural issues would prevent the creation of a single large room across the two houses at any level. The largest single space would have an area less than 100m², although it may be possible to link it by archways to a room of similar size in the adjoining house. The Working Group considered this proposal against the core functions of ASCR listed above and came to the following conclusions:

Advantages

- The houses would offer a larger floor area and the flexibility for additional activities
- The houses are in a convenient location and have an attractive outlook over Gordon Square far better than the Housman Room vista of rubbish bins and skips

- The houses could be decorated and furnished to provide a comfortable and attractive venue but would not be able to match the scale and prestige of the Housman Room
- The proximity to new catering facilities could enhance the present standard of food
- Lifts in the new building would to some extent overcome the issue of stairs and accessibility in the four-storey houses
- It would be possible to offer short-term accommodation for say two visitors or members thus generating new income for ASCR
- The use of card access for members only should improve ASCR security

Disadvantages

- The lack of a single large room would be a serious loss to UCL, eroding the interdisciplinary and serendipitous way in which ASCR operates and the collegiality it engenders
- Management and servicing of the facilities spread over two buildings and four floors would be more complex and expensive for ASCR
- It would not be possible to provide a venue for the larger events presently held in the Housman Room, although these could be accommodated in College's bookable rooms

Next steps:

Even if the disadvantages listed above were to be addressed, the ASCR believes the best option for UCL and for the ASCR would be for the facility to remain in its present location. This would extend the principle of multi-disciplinarity, set out clearly in the Masterplan, beyond the new student facilities in the Wilkins Building to staff; costs would be massively reduced; spaces more appropriate to their needs could be found within the main buildings for Special Collections. However, the ASCR supports UCL desires to make the best use of its estate, and fully accepts the need to consider other options in order to achieve the best overall result.

The Director of Estates and Facilities is therefore requested:

1. to invite a representative of the ASCR to the next meeting of the Estates and Management Committee, so that we can be involved in meaningful discussions on the Bloomsbury Masterplan
2. to produce an alternative plan for the Wilkins Building / library and collections provision that leaves the ASCR in the Housman Room, so that this can be considered during the consultation phase
3. to investigate other space on the main UCL rectangle offering a single large room for the ASCR
4. to look at the feasibility of providing the ASCR with the use of a single large room (150m² minimum) on one floor of the new Beach site building together with just 26 Gordon Square
5. to provide more detailed information regarding the possibility of linking together rooms in the two houses at the same floor levels
6. to confirm that – should the ASCR be required to move - all costs of relocation, refurbishment (including furnishings), to the design and choice of the ASCR, and the costs of provision by College Collections of artworks, would be met by College, not by ASCR