

### WORLD CONSERVATION AND EXHIBITIONS CENTRE

## IMPROVING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

The British Museum is one of the most popular visitor attractions in the world. As the Museum has developed its exhibitions programme its popularity has increased, and this has revealed a number of issues relating to the ease and safe circulation of visitors through the Museum.

The new World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre will address some of these issues by relocating the special exhibitions programme from the Reading Room to a new purpose-built exhibitions centre. This will allow the Reading Room to be returned to more appropriate uses. Importantly, it also allows the opportunity to create a better flow around the Museum, removing some of the routes that currently force people to double back on themselves. This will help ease some of the more congested areas within the Museum, for example the extremely busy Egyptian Sculpture Gallery (Room 4).

Having considered a number of options for access and circulation to the new galleries, the Museum believes that the best option is to reinstate former openings from the Great Court.

An additional advantage of this approach is that it does not interfere with any original stonework, using previous openings within the fabric of the Great Court. (see picture).

This careful review has been carried out with a number of organisations, including English Heritage, Purcell Miller Tritton, David Bonnett Associates, the Museum's Access Advisory Group and other disability access experts.



Full-length window openings from the 1930s. Only recently closed up, it is proposed to reuse these openings in the building to form the doorways through to the galleries and new centre.

'As a disabled user of the Museum, I very much welcome the planned new entrance from the Great Court, as this will vastly improve access and circulation through the Museum and help ease congestion'

Yvette Van Giap  
(British Museum Access Advisory Group member)

'It will bring the Great Court to life'

'I agree the flow of people through the Museum can be improved by this proposal'

## The management of visitors

There are two pinch points at the north-west corner of the main Museum quadrangle which need to be resolved in order to improve visitor flow.

At present there is just a single doorway from the Great Court into the Wellcome Trust Gallery (Room 24). This is one of the most awkward bottlenecks in the Museum, complicated by the pair of staircases within the Wellcome Trust Gallery which take visitors down to the lower floor African Galleries, but which further restrict movement.

The second pinch point is the north end of the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery where visitors are forced to double back on themselves.

By opening up the currently unused Palestine and Cracherode Rooms (see plan below), and eventually also the Banksian Rooms on the east side, it will be possible to allow public circulation to take place on all four wings of the Museum at Level 2 as well as at Level 6, between the East and West stairs, thus allowing circumnavigation.

This east-west movement will help visitors better understand the Museum's layout and will help them orientate themselves in relation to the Great Court. The blind doorway in the north-west corner of the Great Court to the Palestine Room will also be reopened.



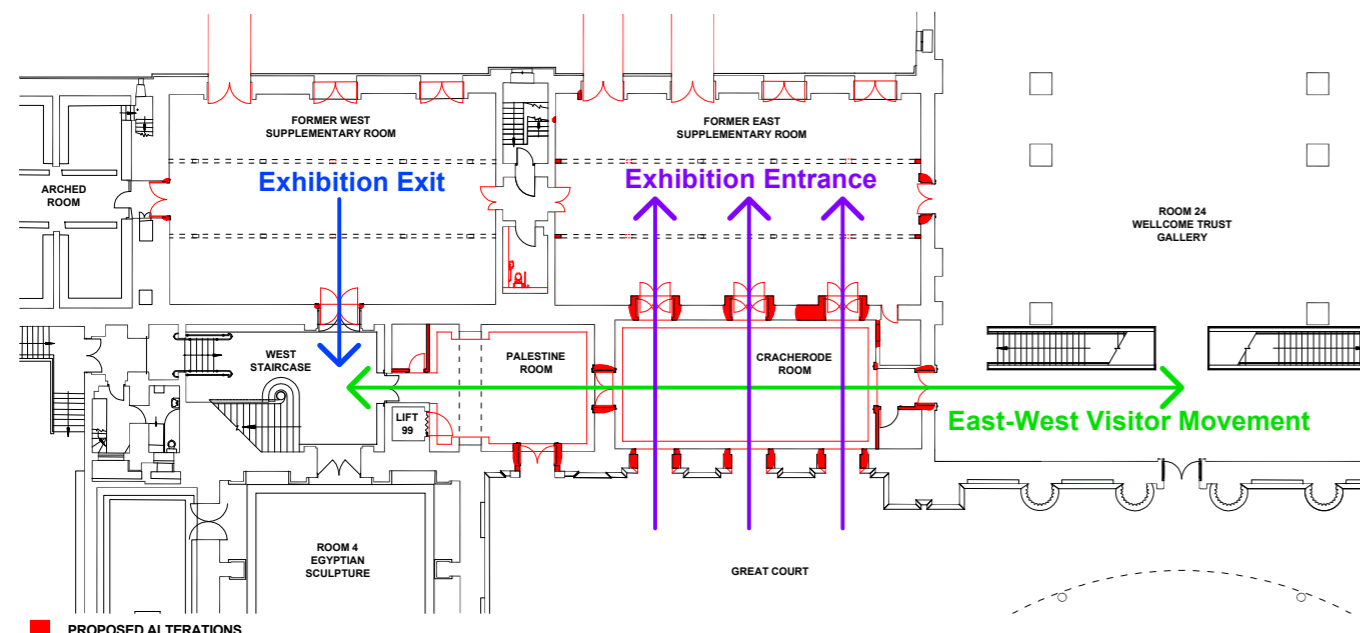
View of north-west corner of the Great Court



Wellcome Trust Gallery, Room 24



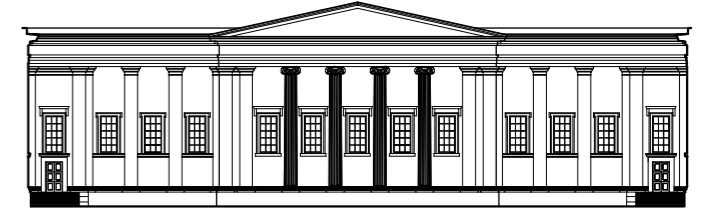
Egyptian Sculpture Gallery, Room 4



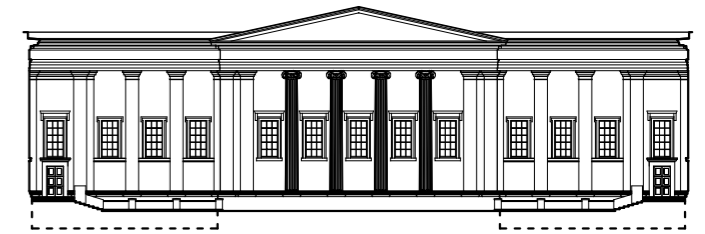
## The north elevation of the Great Court

The north elevation has undergone numerous changes since it was first constructed in 1838. Dramatic changes have taken place which have made an uninterrupted view of the elevation impossible, notably the building of the Reading Room in 1856 and Foster's Great Court scheme in 2000. The following illustrations show some of the changes to the elevation since construction.

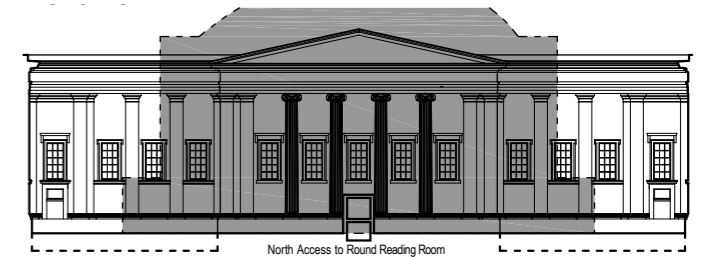
When the North Wing was built in 1838 there was no central entrance but instead side doors into the entrance halls to the East and West stairs, approached by flights of steps.



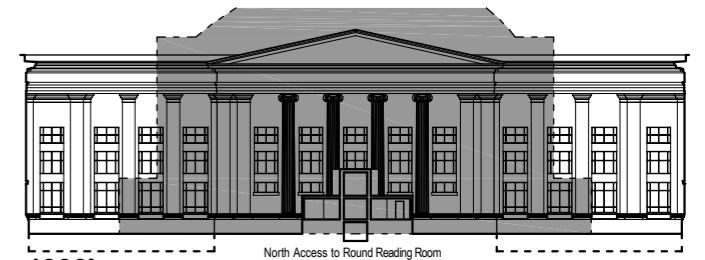
In 1840 the stairs were changed and 'areas' were created to accommodate windows into basement level book stores.



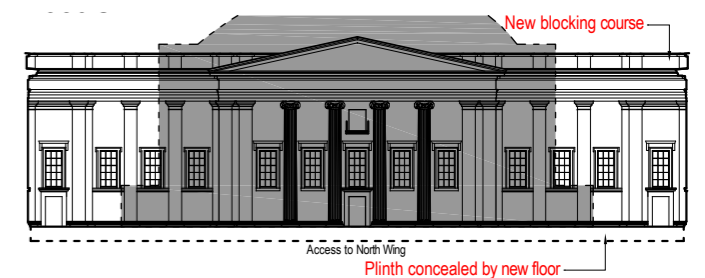
In 1856 the Reading Room and the book stacks were built, along with a new central entrance into the North Wing. The side entrances were blocked. From this time the north elevation was no longer on public view.



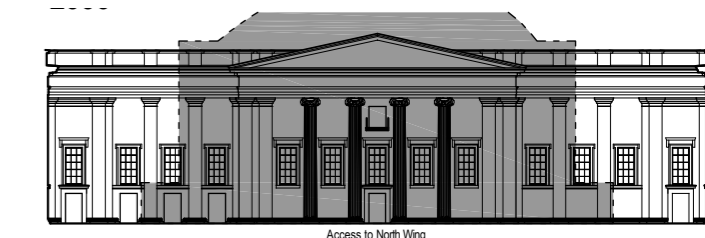
In the 1930s new tall, metal windows were inserted which interrupted the Attic base.



In 2000, under the Great Court scheme, a new floor was introduced removing Smirke's plinth from view; an enlarged blocking course supported the new roof. 'Blind' doors at the corners were created along with a new opening through to the upper floor at the centre.



In the 2009 proposal, the corner door is to be reopened and three additional openings are to be formed within the former 1930s window openings.



## Reinstating openings from the Great Court

The Museum welcomes up to 25,000 visitors every day, with popular exhibitions attracting up to 400 visitors an hour.

The new exhibition entrance via the Great Court aims to greatly improve the visitors' exhibition experience and to safely manage visitor levels, both in the Great Court and in surrounding galleries, some of the busiest and most popular in the Museum.

In reviewing the possible entrance options, the Museum carried out detailed visitor flow modelling based on past exhibition data, with input from exhibition designers, access, health and safety consultants, security and operations teams, and architects. The study concluded that only the proposed Great Court option would adequately and safely handle this level of visitor numbers.

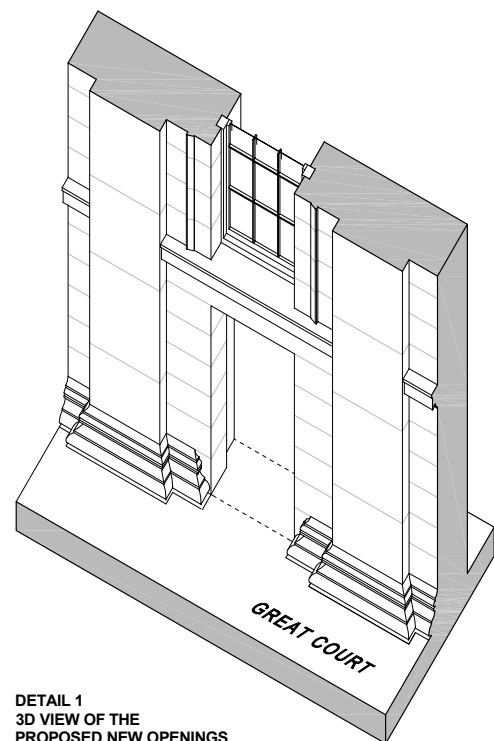
Three openings are proposed that fit within the three bays of the Cracherode Room. The Museum has investigated three alternative ways of treating these openings:

1. A recreation of the Robert Smirke door from the Great Court into the Palestine Room (which was reintroduced in 2000).
2. A form of architrave used by Sydney Smirke elsewhere in the Museum which is shallow in depth.
3. New openings through the wall without any traditional architrave, and finished with Attic base mouldings to the wall on either side of the opening.

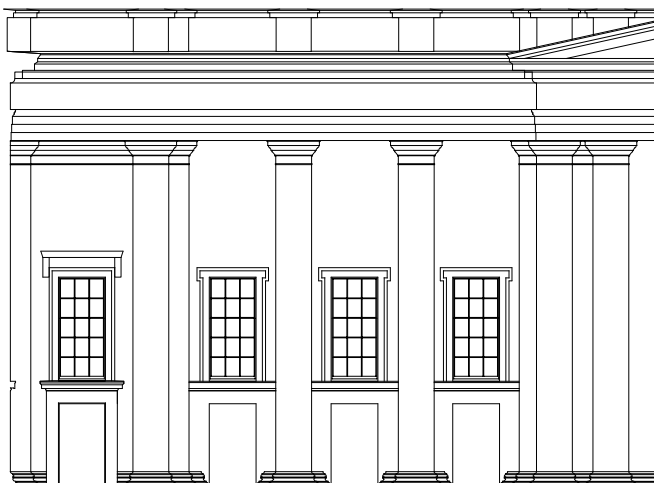
Of the three options, the first has been dismissed as it competes with the original Smirke design. The second option does not work architecturally as even shallow architraves give too much prominence to the openings.

The third option has been chosen as the most appropriate because it is clean, simple and unobtrusive, and by using the Attic base either side of the openings, the alterations can be carried out to stonework which was introduced in 2000, avoiding any interference with original stonework.

The Museum needs to create a special exhibitions gallery suitable for the 21st century. The Museum believes that the only satisfactory way of achieving this requires forming additional openings through from the Great Court to enable access to the new gallery. In doing this, the problems of visitor movement within existing spaces can also be greatly improved. The solution is sensitive to the Museum's existing architecture and will not affect any original stonework. All stone removed will be stored by the Museum in case it needs to be reinstated at any future date.



DETAIL 1  
3D VIEW OF THE  
PROPOSED NEW OPENINGS



GREAT COURT ELEVATION AS PROPOSED

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