Building Development Framework
Towards the future

The British Museum
For 255 years the British Museum has made its collection available to the public, both in London and increasingly in Britain and abroad. Today over 6.5 million people visit annually, and the number grows every year. One in ten overseas visitors to the UK comes to the BM. Of overseas visitors to London it is one in four.

The BM is a unique attraction. There is no other place in the world where people can see so clearly the history of what it is to be human. From two-million-year-old African handaxes to 21st-century Japanese ceramics, the BM collection is an unparalleled storehouse of world experience. Here visitors from any country can compare the diverse structures of human thought, creativity, belief and power over time and across cultures, all vividly represented through man-made objects from around the globe.

Conservation is at the heart of the BM’s expertise: not just of the diverse materials that make up its irreplaceable collection, but also in its care for, and development of, the buildings whose purpose is to make the collection accessible to the public. The BM has undertaken changes to its buildings in practically every decade since it opened in 1759, maintaining their fabric, improving their use. It was with this in mind that the BM set out to review how its facilities could best support the collection and accommodate its increasing number of visitors in the 21st century. The built estate must develop – sustainably and strategically – if it is to extend engagement with the collection, making it available to all while meeting new challenges such as environmental responsibility and the BM’s ever-increasing programme of national and international loans. Among museums, the BM is the world’s leading lender of objects to outside institutions.

Visit Britain, the national tourism agency, has set a goal to increase the number of visitors to Britain from 31 million to 40 million by 2020. As one of the country’s most popular tourist destinations, the Museum will expect to see a marked increase in visitor numbers - putting pressure on every aspect of the building. The Building Development Framework provides a strategic overview to develop and manage the estate in Bloomsbury in light of rising visitor numbers and current and future demands. Its goal is to support the essential purpose of the British Museum, making the collection a greater resource of inspiration and excellence than ever before.

Neil MacGregor
The British Museum opened in 1759, created by Parliament as the world’s first national museum. The collection was intended for the enlightenment of all people, British and foreign, and was to be available free of charge. This founding principle remains at the heart of the Museum’s aspirations.

The purpose of the BM, both as an organisation and as a set of buildings, is to be a place where people can encounter the objects in the collection, and where ideas, knowledge and understanding are generated through exploration of the human past. The collection’s own historical significance – it is an essential point of reference for the history of human cultural achievement – makes it a resource of global importance. Many of the Museum’s conservators, curators and other staff are internationally recognised leaders in their fields and there is a strong demand for the Museum’s expertise. The BM disseminates the latest research about the collection widely, in print and online, in both academic and popular forms.

This outward-looking use of the collection and the knowledge it comprises is reflected in the BM’s ambition to collaborate with other bodies around the world in research, digitisation, training and skill-sharing. In 2012/13 the BM attracted nearly £3.5 million in external funding from UK and international research bodies, often as part of collaborative studies with partner institutions. The BM lends more objects than any museum in the world, sending artefacts and touring exhibitions across the UK and abroad to make the most of the collection and contribute to the worldwide museum community. In 2012/13 it loaned 4500 objects, more than half to museums outside the UK. To promote this work, the most recent improvement to the BM site has been the new World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre (WCEC), which provides state-of-the-art facilities to support conservation of the collection and its dispatch beyond the Museum walls.

The Museum’s purpose, to connect the public to the objects in the collection, remains constant. But the process of being the British Museum is always changing and never ends. The Museum has to maintain the existing collection, but must also strengthen it. The story it tells needs to evolve to take account of the way the world around it changes. Over the centuries, as the nature and extent of the collection have grown alongside developments in conservation, scientific research, academic study and public accessibility, the buildings have been altered to respond to this progress.

This is all the more pressing today as the BM tries to respond to a large and growing public appetite for serious exhibitions, lectures, debates, discussions – and most of all for the celebrated sculptures, ceramics, coins, drawings and other artefacts that make up the collection. If the BM is to encourage regular visits from as wide an audience as possible, both locally and from around the UK and the world, it must address shortcomings within the buildings. It needs to transform the physical experience of visiting the Museum, preserving what works, acknowledging what doesn’t and rethinking what goes on within its walls.

This Building Development Framework aims to engage with that very process, looking back in time to the Museum’s first principles and forward to its future uses. Under three strategic objectives, it outlines the Museum’s ambitions for developing and preserving the physical site so that the BM may properly fulfil its purpose as a museum of the world for the world.
In 2007, the Museum’s Masterplan set out plans to improve the conditions under which the collection is stored. Building the World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre (WCEC) met those objectives, with a new environmentally controlled storage and logistic facility and state-of-the-art science laboratories and conservation studios. The new Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery has improved our ability to host major exhibitions and more.

With ever rising visitor numbers the Museum must now focus on its visitors, improving the buildings for the public and providing thought-provoking ways for everyone to engage with one of the world’s great museum collections.

The BM will:

1. Develop and improve the buildings for the benefit of our visitors
   in order to

2. Extend and enhance their engagement with the collection.

   Underpinning everything, we will

3. Promote financial and environmental sustainability.
Develop and improve the buildings for the benefit of our visitors

The British Museum is a great public institution. Face it from the pavements of Great Russell Street and one sees a pillared monument dedicated to the public good. It is the world’s museum – a collection of artefacts from across the globe that measure all that we have been and are as human beings. It is rightly celebrated around the world.

Since its foundation in the eighteenth century, the BM has been open free of charge to the public. Beginning with 1000 visitors to the Museum in its earliest decades, the BM has always sought to plan the development of its buildings around the needs of the public. Today, visitor numbers are in the millions and have burgeoned at an astonishing rate in recent times. Visitor figures rose from five million in 2000 to 6.7 million in 2013.

The historical development of the BM has meant that different buildings and large-scale features were added to the complex at different times. With lower numbers of visitors, this was manageable. Today, helping millions of visitors every year explore such a complicated public space is a challenge, and the BM is developing ambitious plans to make it easier for people to move within the buildings and access their collections. These visitor figures are a measure of the Museum’s enormous success. But they have created severe points of congestion in the BM.

Museum buildings progression 1827–2014

Past and predicted visitor numbers, 1900–2020

Great Court opened 2000
London Olympics 2012
Museum of Mankind closes 2004
WCEC opens 2014

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At busy times visitors circulate only with great difficulty, and newcomers, unable to move around easily, find the Museum layout hard to grasp. Points of access to key areas are particularly challenging.

With so many new museums being built worldwide to the highest architectural standards of both the public and commercial spheres, what visitors expect of a professional museum has changed profoundly. The BM – as the UK’s most visited tourist destination – needs to respond to these rising expectations.

Solutions to this will vary. Clearer signage and wayfinding, both in and around the buildings, would assist visitors. Entry and exit points need rethinking to increase the permeability of the building, especially at popular junctions within the site. These options will be explored with architects, designers and the relevant public authorities.

The WCEC is already opening up new possibilities for how visitors move around the Museum. It will become part of wider plans to encourage greater numbers of people to enter the BM by its under-used Montague Place entrance on the north side, easing some of the pressure on the Main entrance at the south.
With its prominent position in the middle of Norman Foster’s Great Court, the blue-domed Reading Room space could become a feature attraction as visitors enter the Museum or during their visit. Since the British Library moved to its successful new location in St Pancras, the empty former Reading Room has proved a popular venue for temporary exhibitions – from China’s terracotta warriors to the dramatically preserved remains of Pompeii and Herculaneum. With that function now moved to the BM’s new purpose-built Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery which opened in March 2014, the former Reading Room could remain a space where the public engage with the collections, for example through exhibition display or performance. The opportunity to define a new role for the former Reading Room of the British Library and bring this glorious space into permanent, accessible use could create an exciting addition to the visitor experience.
Attendant on every visitor’s experience of the Museum are the facilities they may use. No framework for building development understands how visitors react to a public space unless it also pays attention to shops, cafés, ticketing, information points, gallery seating, toilets, activity spaces and event facilities. Extensive problems with the location, use, quantity, size and other aspects have emerged as visitor numbers have put greater pressure on the building’s services. The Great Court too needs to be assessed in terms of its function for visitors to make the most of its vast scale and central position, as does the BM forecourt. Overall the ambition is to maximise what the BM can achieve in its public spaces.

A substantial amount of space at the Bloomsbury site is not open to the public. The BM needs fresh thinking in each of these areas to help visitors make the most of their visit.
Extend and enhance our visitors’ engagement with the collection

The BM’s purpose is simple: to enable the public to enjoy the collection – to wonder at it, be intrigued by it, learn from it, and be inspired to know more about the people and history behind the objects. BM programmes introduce schoolchildren to the collection, artists respond to it to create new works, scholars study its vast resources. Families, tourists and people from around Britain and the globe flock to it – to discover the intricate history of their own and other cultures. The BM is fundamentally a research collection – a place where knowledge can be uncovered. As an introduction to the world, it is a rare space where visitors can see cultures side by side and identify the connections between them. It is in many ways the mirror of our globalised age. The collection has never been more important to understanding the world as a whole.

The BM is constantly striving within its financial resources to improve the ways in which it presents the collection on-site and online. Public expectations change, knowledge grows and galleries require updating to stay relevant to visitors. Expert staff must ensure the highest standard of care for objects on display – monitoring conservation requirements, adopting the latest scientific techniques, and trying to bring more of the collection on-site. Parts of the vast BM collection have, of necessity, been stored off-site over the decades, but there is a strong drive now to consolidate the collection in a more rational manner suitable to today’s needs. This will improve research and conservation, and increasingly enable public access not just to objects on display in the permanent galleries, but to other parts of the research collection.

New gallery proposals continue this work. Renovations will include a major redisplay of the celebrated Waddesdon Collection of Renaissance art, and an enlargement of the permanent display of the BM’s Islamic artefacts. Proposals will address not just the quality of display but its cultural balance within the BM as a whole. Some parts of the world are currently under-represented. These include the Pacific and Australia, as well as South America. Spaces on the Museum’s ground floor are under consideration as possible locations for new displays.
The BM will continue to address the widening demand to incorporate digital technology – to capture new audiences and work with the collection in new ways. The Samsung Digital Discovery Centre in the BM has been enormously successful, but all galleries need to feature these new forms of access on-site, as well as connecting to new directions in online and off-site engagement and research. With over 3.5 million of the BM’s object records now available via its website, the prospects for continuing to develop ways for people to engage with the research collection are brighter than ever. How visitors use new media within the Museum is an area that is changing rapidly. Building in a variety of digital platforms for conveying information and allowing audiences to connect to our resources in different ways is central to any future infrastructural development.
The ground-floor galleries which focus on the Museum’s collection of sculpture from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece are in need of extensive refurbishment. Their current layout is forty years old, and presents the history taught two generations ago. These rooms contain some of the most important, famous and popular objects within the collection – including the Rosetta Stone and Parthenon Sculptures – and they are extremely busy. The BM plans to rethink these galleries throughout, moving away from individual room refurbishment to a wider understanding of how the suite of galleries works together. In what will be a major programme of redisplay, the Museum hopes to transform the visitor experience – physically, intellectually, digitally. The need to remodel the galleries’ sometimes awkward layout, particularly in light of large visitor numbers, is an excellent opportunity for the BM to modernise what the spaces can offer.

The opening of the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery in the World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre and its new pathways into the main museum have inspired a reimagining of a number of spaces across the ground floor. These present new opportunities for an appealing display of independent single objects. Schemes are likely to include digital interaction in these areas, but the main focus will be on exhibiting more large-scale sculpture from across the collection’s cultural range. Such bold features – in the Great Court and elsewhere – could provide a dramatic welcome to the Museum and a gateway for visitors into the themes and cultures addressed within the permanent galleries.

The World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre will also significantly improve the storage of, and public access to, some of the BM’s most important and vulnerable artefacts. The research collection of objects which cannot be on permanent display is a rewarding resource that the Museum can draw on in many ways. In light of this, there is a pressing need to upgrade the storage of many areas of the collection: to improve their environmental conditions, reconfigure their historic dispersal across several sites in London, make them more easily accessible to students and unlock their potential to engage our visitors behind the scenes. Solutions to bringing more of the dispersed stores of artefacts on site are being examined, including reassessing which collections in Bloomsbury are best located on this site. Alongside improvements to staff accommodation, renewed attention to the BM’s storage needs will ensure the best future care, study and presentation of the collection, and reinvigorate thinking about the collection’s potential for audiences today.

All these changes will keep the BM’s display spaces relevant, forward-looking and exciting to visit, bringing the collection to a higher standard of display and accessibility than ever before.
Underlying everything in the BM’s Building Development Framework is the well-being of the buildings. How visitors use the space and the displays they see are the public surface of a wider, complex arrangement of supporting structures. What stands behind is as important to maintain and improve as any observable feature.

As an institution the BM may seem to represent a fixed entity to the public, but it has changed and grown continuously since its foundation. The BM’s success internationally would not have risen so markedly if it had not developed in step with the world it represents in its collection. New buildings have been added to the west and north to display more of the collection. Architect Robert Smirke’s open courtyard was, in the 1830s, filled in, as library stacks and the Reading Room were built inside. When the British Library’s swelling collection moved out of the BM to an efficient new building near St Pancras in the 1990s, a new design – the Great Court – opened up Smirke’s original courtyard and left the former Reading Room at the centre of a dramatic new public space. When it opened in 2000, Foster + Partners had created at the heart of the Museum ‘one of the most extraordinary covered squares to be found in any city, ancient or modern’, as the architecture critic of the Guardian described it.

The most recent major development has been in the north-west corner of the site. In designing the new World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre, architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners have once again responded to the changing needs of visitors and staff and the collection. The new building features a specially designed exhibitions suite, purpose-built spaces for the research collection, extended on-site storage for fragile materials, state-of-the-art conservation studios and science labs, superior digital infrastructure and a secure logistics hub to facilitate the large number of loans that the BM makes nationally and internationally.

Each evolution of the BM has worked hard to find that delicate balance between imaginative innovation and preservation of the past. With its great neoclassical façade, the BM has Grade I listed status, and there is a duty of care toward the buildings which house the collection. Among the many plans for the buildings, targeted expenditure is needed to attend to their historic fabric. The BM’s ambition is to make good longstanding repairs and to renew our inefficient, inherited energy systems from under-investment in the past, manage current wear and tear, and yet still fulfil our forward-looking strategic objectives. Among the alterations the BM continues to undertake are ensuring that staff facilities can meet their changing needs and those of the Museum.

Promote financial and environmental sustainability
Ambitions for the BM site inevitably demand a robust consideration of the Museum’s current and future financial resources. The Building Development Framework addresses within each of its measures the need to rationalise cost, increase efficiency and raise revenue. The quality and location of shops, cafés and restaurants across the site need to meet visitors’ expectations and enhance opportunities for spending. At present, if public events are over-crowded, as they sometimes are, and services hard to reach by virtue of congestion or long queues, visitors are discouraged from lingering in the Museum. This is also true where the BM’s provision for disabled access, toilets and cloakrooms is insufficient to cope with our large visitor numbers.

To improve the circulation of people and the performance of the building as a whole is to create, among other benefits, a superior platform for generating revenue. All our visitors will compare coming to the BM to the high-quality experiences they have had in the best museums worldwide, and the Museum accordingly needs to continue to improve in order to satisfy its increasingly sophisticated, global audience. It makes good business sense. An excellent visit has a direct positive impact not just on the BM’s reputation, but on its finances, as well as those of the local area to which it attracts so many people. The BM requires investment because it makes a significant contribution to the wider economy – in Camden, around London and across the UK.

Savings are also a feature of every programme. Extended cycles of planning offer opportunities for efficiency of scale and cost-savings. Long-term maintenance and other contracts could provide better value for money. If greater on-site storage can be designed, off-site collection stores can be sold or no longer leased. The same is true of perimeter office space. With its prime location in central London, the BM will let some of its buildings to raise income, as staff provision is covered by new facilities in the World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre and elsewhere.

The Museum’s programmes for environmental sustainability are also allied not just to its ambitions to be greener, but to the need to generate reductions in both expenditure and sustainable carbon emissions reduction. The new World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre will provide the lead. Its green roof, ventilation systems and other measures have all been designed to support the environment and reduce energy consumption. With improved systems in place, the buildings will perform better. They will conserve heat, light, water and other resources, use less energy and cost less to run.

Significant levels of ongoing investment are required. A certain cost must be met to ensure that facilities for BM visitors, the research collection and maintenance of the historic building fabric provide the quality of environment and experience commensurate with the BM’s international importance and visitors’ expectations. The Museum will explore opportunities to enhance revenue from our existing income-generating activities – special exhibitions, hospitality, events – but support from central government remains vital if the Museum is to sustain its cultural and educational activity. Funds provided by research bodies, donations, membership schemes and other philanthropic support are also essential to further the Museum’s delivery of its strategic objectives. The BM is committed to pursuing every reasonable means to ensure its financial robustness.
Keeping pace with a long tradition of building evolution, and holding to a vision of the public purpose of the institution, the BM aims to provide the best care and display of the collections, and meet the needs of every visitor in the 21st century and beyond. The three strategic objectives of the BM Building Development Framework will shape all future planning for the BM site. The framework provides an overview of a wide array of changing documents that map out specific plans for the BM buildings in the coming years. The goal is to keep one of the world’s greatest museums as effective, inspirational and enjoyable as its visitors and collection deserve.

For more information about the Building Development Framework, contact Kevin O’Reilly, Head of Operations Strategic Planning, on 020 7323 8592 or email koreilly@britishmuseum.org