An Taisce
The National Trust for Ireland

Decisions, Planning & Property Devt. Dept.
Dublin City Council
Block 3, Floor 4
Civic Offices
Wood Quay
Dublin 8

27 November 2019

Re: Proposal for conversion and change of use of existing vacant former visitor centre to 56-bed hostel and construction of four-floor rear extension at 15 Usher's Island, Dublin 8, which is a Protected Structure

Planning Ref. 4300/19

Dear Sir or Madam,

Thank you for referral of the above inviting comment. We wish to respond as follows.

The subject premises at 15 Usher's Island on the Liffey Quays is a handsome three-bay house of the late-Georgian period, with four-storey redbrick elevation over raised basement, and columned stone doorcase. The interior retains a good degree of refined early-19th century detail. It is a Protected Structure and is located within a designated Conservation Area.

It is given a rating of 'National' interest by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, and according to the publication *The Buildings of Ireland - Dublin*, 2005, the house may date to the 1770s. The extent of pre-1800 structural fabric is unclear, but the building stands on its own merits as a townhouse of its period.

The principal importance of the house is its place in literary history as the setting for James Joyce's The Dead, described by TS Eliot as "one of the greatest short stories ever written", and chosen as Joyce's grand-aunts had lived here in the 1890s. The house thus has a cultural significance that few other Georgian terraced buildings of Dublin have - for example the setting of Molly & Leopold Bloom's house on Eccles Street has been demolished.

Having sat vacant and suffered damage for many years previously, the house was purchased and successfully restored in the early 2000s by a Joyce aficionado, with its missing top storey and pitched roof reinstated. It was also afforded increased physical prominence on the Liffey quayside at this time by construction of the Santiago Calatrava-designed James Joyce Bridge in front of it in 2003.

As a visitor centre, the restored house subsequently hosted a flurry of Joyce- and Dead-related activity in the 2000s, but fell vacant again in the wake of the economic crash and was sold in 2017. While the rescuing of the building from its current dormancy is welcome in principle, it is considered that the house is of too great cultural importance for conversion to a hostel with the associated extensive subdivision and impacts on the historic layout, plan form and fabric, and the increased intensity of use which would result in deleterious wear on tear on historic fabric.

The proposed block at the rear is particularly problematic as it would require removal of the arched staircase windows between ground and first floor, and first and second floor. One of the most memorable scenes in the 1987 John Huston film of the Dead was of Angelic Huston, playing the part of Gretta Conroy, pausing in the half landing against the arched-window backdrop while the strains of the *The Lass of Aughrim* wafted from the drawing room. This is a key moment both in the story and in the film.

In regard to changes to the plan and fabric to accommodate the hostel and its extension, the proposed development is in conflict with section 11.1.5.3 of the Dublin City Development Plan 2016-22 which provides:

> *"Interventions in Protected Structures should be to the minimum …Any development which affects the interior of a Protected Structure must be highly sensitive to the historic fabric and special interest of the interior, including its plan-form, hierarchy of spaces, structure and architectural detail, fixtures and fittings and materials. The original plan form of Protected Structures should be protected or reinstated and not compromised by unsympathetic alteration or extension."*

And with the general policy which is:

> "*To ensure that the special interest of Protected Structures is protected. Development will conserve and enhance Protected Structures and their curtilage."* (Policy CHC2)

<u>Hostel & Rear Extension Refusal Precedent for Georgian Townhouse, No 14 Henrietta Street</u>

In 2001 An Bord Pleanála refused permission for a hostel and rear extension at No 14 Henrietta Street, a Protected Structure within a Conservation Area (Reference No. PL 29N.121679). This proposal was very comparable in intensity of use - with bulky rear extension - to that currently proposed for No.15 Usher's Island, and the contents of the refusal schedule should be noted in the context of consideration of the current proposal.

Refusal schedule:

> *"1. Number 14 Henrietta Street is an important protected structure located in a Georgian street of large-scale townhouses. This area is also designated as a Conservation Area in the current Dublin City Development Plan. It is the*

policy of the planning authority to seek to preserve and protect such structures and that alterations and extensions entirely harmonise with existing development in the area. This policy is considered reasonable. It is considered that the rear extension proposed would conflict with the requirements of the development plan by reason of its size, scale and design, would be unsympathetic with and detrimental to the character, appearance and integrity of the protected structure and would result in an incongruous and obtrusive addition that would fail to harmonise with the group of protected structures in this Conservation Area. The proposed development would, therefore, seriously injure the amenities of this and the adjoining protected structures and the amenities of the Conservation Area and be contrary to the proper planning and development of the area.

2. On the basis of the plans, particulars and submissions made in connection with the planning application and the appeal, the Board is not satisfied, having regard to the nature and scale of the use proposed, the works proposed to facilitate the new use and the resultant implications for this important protected structure, that the proposed development can be acceptably accommodated without materially affecting the building's special historic and architectural form, integrity, character and appearance. The proposed development would, therefore, be contrary to the proper planning and development of the area."

No 14 Henrietta Street is now a thriving and successful museum.

Culrural Heritage

The Dublin City Development Plan 2016-22 accords significant weight to the cultural heritage of the city, with an entire chapter of the plan dedicated to 'Built Heritage and Culture' (Chapter 11).

Section 11.2.1 provides:

"The enhancement and promotion of Dublin as a 'City of Character and Culture' … is central to making a vibrant city that is an attractive destination for tourists, the residents of the city and the creative industries. Reinforcing existing cultural quarters, nurturing new cultural initiatives that support emerging cultural quarters and enabling access to cultural development at a local level are essential to developing a city's cultural wealth.

Dublin city faces competition from other international cities in attracting talented workers and needs to make sure that the cultural offering in Dublin is as good as, or better than, other successful international cities."

On account of the loss of cultural use and change of use of the building to a hostel, the proposed development would be in conflict with item 6 of the outlined Cultural Vision for the city in section 11.2.4 to *"Assist Dublin UNESCO City of Literature's ambition to support, animate and develop the designation in the interests of the resident and visitor to Dublin"* and item 2 which is to *"Promote the enhancement of existing cultural assets".*

Conclusion

The return of this nationally-important house at 15 Usher's Island - real-life setting of Joyce's best-known short story, The Dead - to functioning use, and the arresting of any further deterioration in the fabric, is needed. However, and having regard to the foregoing, the proposal currently presented for change of use to a hostel would not be appropriate. Refusal is therefore recommended in order to find a way forward and secure the future of this key cultural building of Dublin.

Sincerely

Kevin Duff
Dublin City Association