

The Royal Academy of Arts takes centre stage with plans to expand in the heart of the West End

How will the Burlington Project transform the Royal Academy physically?

The Burlington Project, which has been designed by Sir David Chipperfield and his project team, will connect Burlington House to Burlington Gardens at the back. He has proposed the simplest and most straightforward way of connecting the two buildings by way of a bridge crossing over from one to the other, dropping down into the RA Schools. In addition, James Pennthorne's grand building on Burlington Gardens will be completely renovated, putting in a modern version of the original Victorian lecture theatre.

And what will that mean for audiences?

The Royal Academy will be doubled in size and transformed from a nineteenth-century building in a semi-private courtyard off Piccadilly into a large campus stretching from Piccadilly to Burlington Gardens – equivalent in area to the British Museum, but right in the heart of the west end.

What aspect of the project excites you the most?

The biggest single change will be the insertion of a new lecture theatre into the space previously occupied by a big Victorian lecture theatre. It has been very carefully designed by DCA to provide an interesting day-lit environment which will allow us to hold big lectures, conferences and events in a way that we have never previously been able to.

How will the project enhance income for the RA? How much retail space will there be in the redeveloped Burlington Gardens building?

We have currently dealt with the need for income by letting part of the ground floor to Pace, a major American art gallery. This has worked well for us and, I hope for them. They have put on an exciting programme of contemporary art exhibitions and pay us the rent we need to cover baseline costs.

Global commercial gallery Pace already occupies space at Burlington Gardens. Will that continue and will the project lead to further partnerships between the RA and the commercial world?

We gave Pace a reasonably long lease in the expectation that it would be a long-term arrangement.

How do you think the project could change the RA's relationship with its surrounding neighbourhood in Mayfair?

I am deeply interested in the nature of the relationship between our buildings and its surroundings. I think that there is the potential to create this part of south Mayfair into an art quarter with major international art galleries, including Pace and Hauser and Wirth operating in the neighbourhood, alongside the smaller art galleries which will operate in a redeveloped Cork Street.

Cities expert Charles Landry has suggested that the RA and its plans could act as a catalyst to rethink this part of Mayfair – with Burlington Gardens pedestrianized along with Cork Street to reinforce its character as an art district. Would you like to see this happen?

Yes, I am keen to do everything I can to help make it happen, through collaboration with the big local landlords like Native Land and the Pollen Estate and through working closely with

Westminster City Council. I think that there is a great opportunity to upgrade the neighbourhood through traffic calming, semi-pedestrianisation, and good quality infrastructure.

How else would you like to see the public realm around Burlington Gardens change?

I think the key is to reduce the amount of traffic, congestion and parking, using some of the same techniques whereby Mount Street and Marylebone High Street have been transformed by Grosvenor and Howard de Walden estates.

Should the area be designated as an arts district through Special Policy Area status? With luxury residential and retail becoming increasingly dominant, should art galleries in the area be protected?

I think it is in the interests of London to maintain a mixed economy in Mayfair. Charles Landry's findings suggested that it is precisely the unusual mix in Mayfair of fashion, retail, art, culture, tailoring and hedge funds, which makes it attractive.

What are the big challenges to tackle before work starts next year?

In our building project, the key challenges are to finish the fund-raising, select the contractors, and ensure that we stick to budget. In the neighbourhood, the challenge is to get local retailers to see that it is in their commercial interests to support changes to the public realm.

A changing display from the RA's vast collection will go on display when the project is completed in 2018, the RA's 250-year anniversary. Do you have a favourite, little seen piece or item from the collection?

I love the work which we display in our General Assembly Room which is not currently seen by the general public, including the self-portrait of Reynolds, our founder. I hope that the public will get a better sense of our history, as well as of us as an institution.

How does the link between Burlington Gardens and the House change the relationship between the two and how will the offer be differentiated? How will the public enjoy the experience and the movement between the two?

I have always viewed Burlington House as ineluctably grand, because of its history, its architecture and its location. I hope that Burlington Gardens will appear more casual, more approachable, with a faster changing programme and more events.