

St Alphege

Solihull

Faculty Application

PROJECT TURNAROUND:
DESIGN NARRATIVE

September 2024



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INTRODUCTION

Project Overview

St Alphege is a 12th Century Grade I listed church forming part of Solihull Parish in the heart of the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull. It is an ancient and beautiful building which sits at the heart of Solihull, close to the commercial, civic and retail hub of its community.

“Project Turnaround” consists of two related developments: a major re-ordering of St Alphege Church, Solihull; and the extension and refurbishment of the adjacent Solihull Parish Centre (the Oliver Bird Hall). It seeks to increase effectiveness, flexibility and connectivity between the church, the Parish Centre and the community, creating a welcoming place of sanctuary. This design narrative seeks to explain the decision-making that has led to the current set of proposals for the Church and its immediate surroundings. It does not address the Parish Centre or the replacement lighting works in the Church.

It is to be read in conjunction with the Statement of Significance and Statement of Needs (which form part of this submission) and therefore does not intend to replicate the information included in these documents.

Background and Process

In the summer of 2021, Solihull PCC undertook a parish-wide consultation to establish key goals for the development of the church estate. The wide response to this consultation resulted in the following key mission priorities:

- To nurture young people and their families
- To provide life-long learning opportunities
- To become more outward looking to serve the communities in our borough

These goals have been summarised into the following strapline:

Growing Disciples, Building Community and Transforming Lives.

The work undertaken to date in the development of this project is summarised as below:

2021

- A sub-group of Solihull PCC was set up in March 2021 to look at how the church buildings might better serve the mission of Solihull Parish, leading to the discussion of an options paper with key members of the parish leadership in June 2021.
- Responses to the parish-wide consultation informed these outline requirements.
- The Birmingham Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches (DAC) were notified at this early stage of the possibility of re-ordering St Alphege Church. They were keen to offer advice on archaeology and environmental considerations.
- The diocesan Historic Places of Worship Support Officer visited in August 2021 and pledged support for the project.
- Proposals were brought to a dedicated joint meeting of the PCC and the St Alphege District Church Council (DCC) for discussion in September 2021.

2022

- The project was paused whilst a planning application for redevelopment of the old rectory site was considered. The application was submitted in March 2021, refused in December 2021 and an appeal dismissed in July 2022. In November 2022 the PCC agreed to use some of the proceeds from the recent sale of a curate’s house towards a first phase of Project Turnaround, instead of the previous plan to use proceeds from the aborted development of the old rectory site.
- A “Brief for Architects” was prepared for tender in November 2022.

2023

- The PCC appointed BFF Architects to undertake site appraisals and develop options with outline costs against these requirements for both St Alphege Church and the Parish Centre.
- This work was presented in a Feasibility Study to a joint meeting of the PCC and all three DCCs on 23rd May 2023 with feedback gathered in the following months.
- The PCC gave the go-ahead, as a first phase of Project Turnaround, to replace the lighting in St Alphege Church based on proposals from Bruce Kirk of Light Perceptions Limited, part of CBG Consultants.

2024

- More detailed proposals for the Church and surrounding landscape were worked up, leading to a presentation to the PCC on 17th July 2024 at which the body unanimously agreed to submit a faculty application, a planning application and to consult the congregations.
- The lighting works have now been completed.



THE EXISTING BUILDING
EXTERIOR VIEWS



1. West entrance



2. North entrance



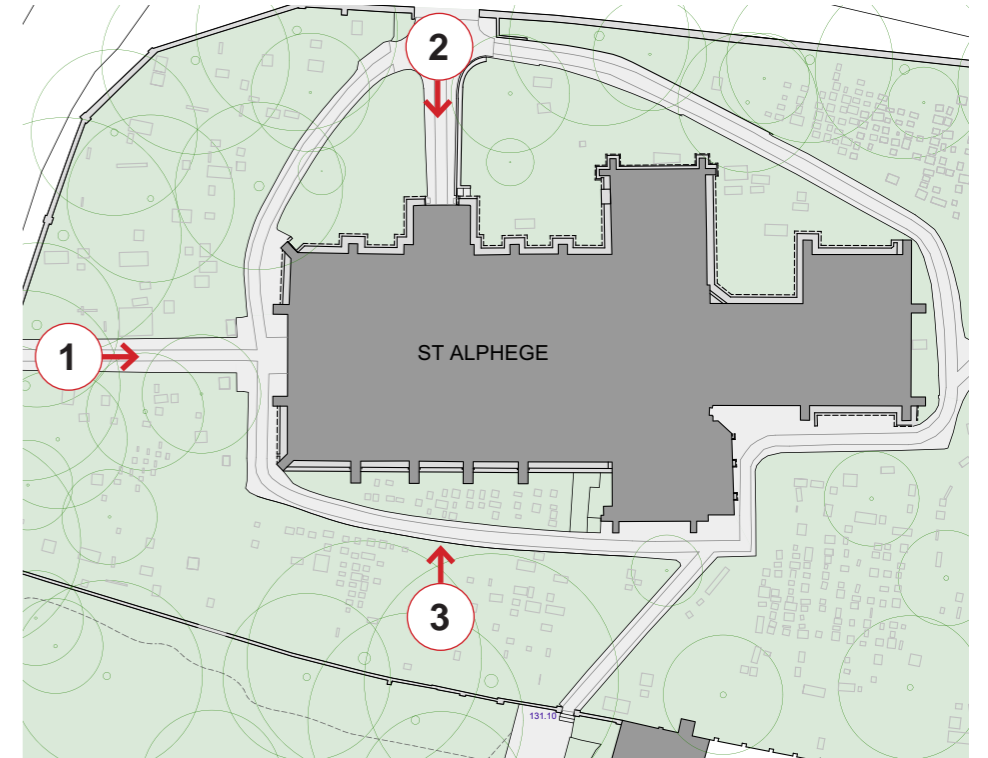
3. South facade



4. Aerial view from above



5. Aerial view from south-east



KEY PLAN

THE EXISTING BUILDING
INTERIOR VIEWS



1. View towards altar



2. Crossing and organ pipes



3. Font and west door



4. North transept (St Katherine's Chapel)



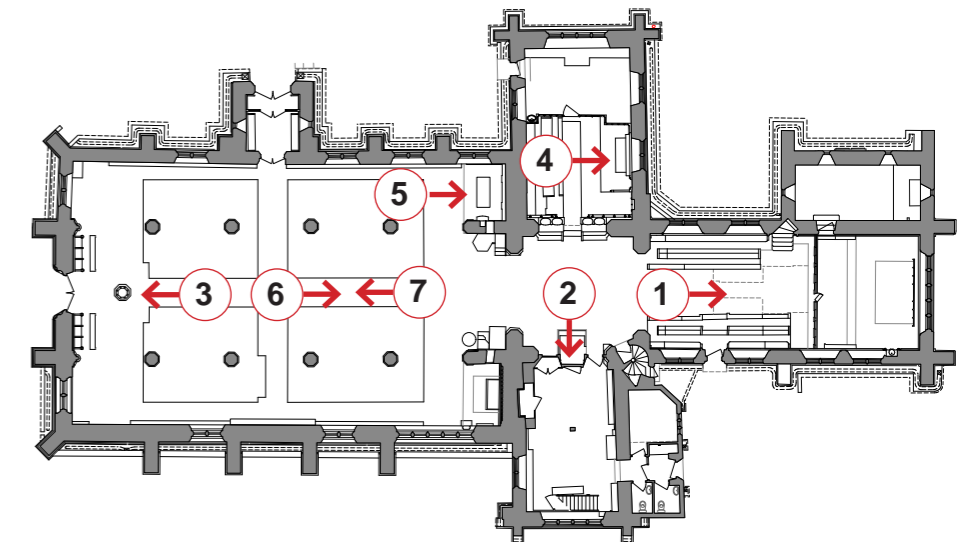
5. Chapel of St Thomas-a-Becket



6. View along nave towards chancel



7. View along nave towards west



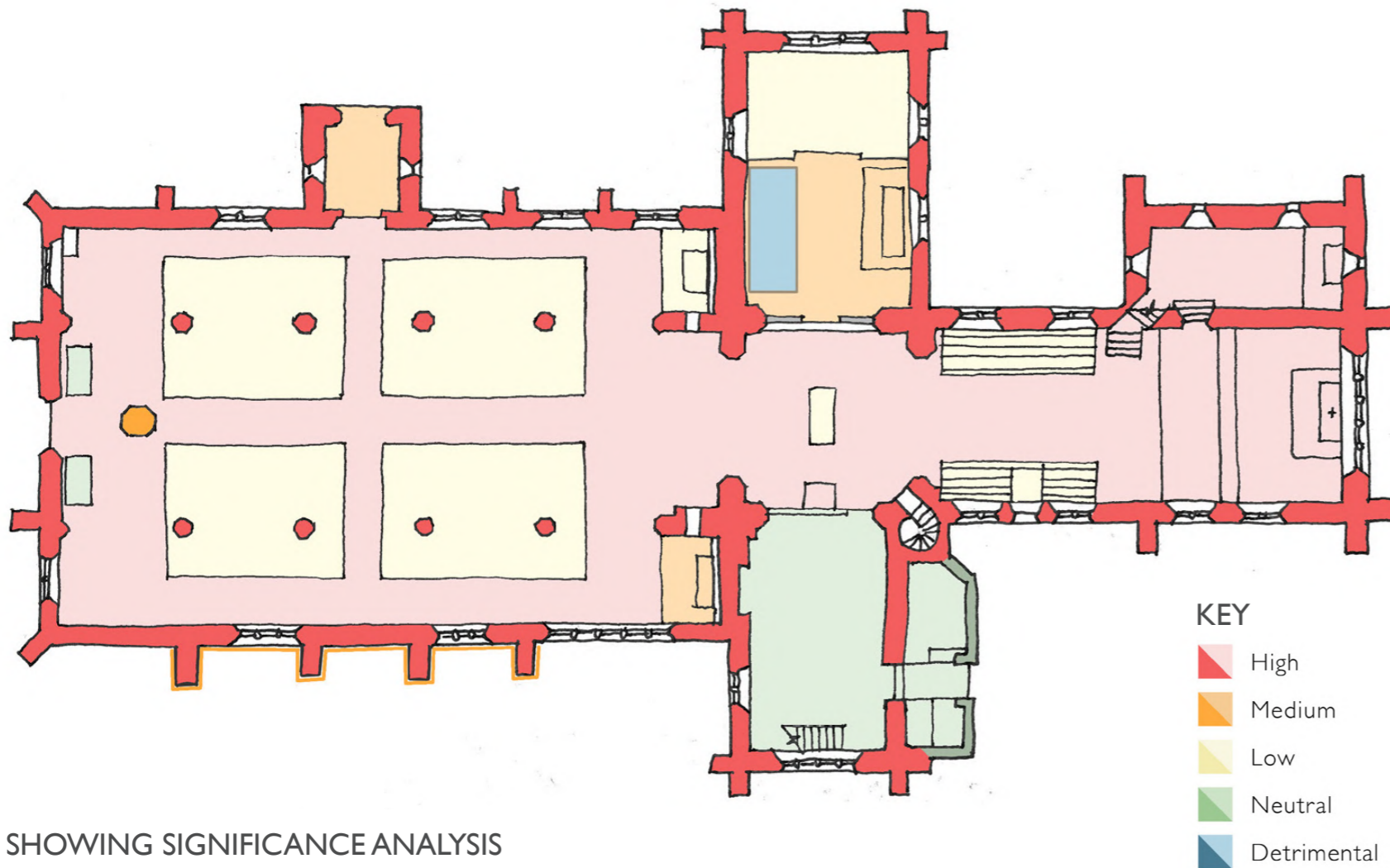
KEY PLAN

THE EXISTING BUILDING

“It is a valued sacred space but may seem to the outsider to be a relic.”
 [from the Statement of Needs]

St Alphege’s exceptional location immediately adjacent to shops, schools and transport links, brings the Solihull public into its vicinity on a daily basis. However, its current appearance is not necessarily welcoming to those who do not belong to its worshipping community. Heavy timber doors and closed gates facing the shopping centre and High Street do not entice visitors across the threshold, and once inside, the lack of light and dark-coloured surfaces contribute to the lack of welcome. The back of the church is cluttered, and there is little clear signage or information.

St Alphege Church is currently used primarily for formal worship with congregations at regular services from 20 to 150 (although up to 321 people can be seated in the fixed pews). This number is boosted slightly by casual visitors and a weekly music recital, but the space remains largely unused for much of the week.



PLAN SHOWING SIGNIFICANCE ANALYSIS

THE BRIEF

“We want our buildings to become more compelling by providing the facilities needed to encourage people in.”
 [from the Brief to Architects]

“Even when the church is closed, we want the public to be able to glimpse into the light of a sacred space.”
 [from the Statement of Needs]

The focus of this phase of ‘Project Turnaround’ is to create a more flexible environment within St Alphege, to facilitate its use in new ways to serve the evolving needs of the parish and its wider community into the future. Interventions are focused on creating a adaptable, functional space able to embrace new challenges as a public building as well as retaining its authentic and historical role as the town’s parish church. It needs to accommodate a wider range of activities as well as formal services, whilst maintaining its integrity as a historic place of worship.

More detail is provided in the Statement of Needs submitted alongside this document, which summarises specific needs under three headings:

1. Welcome, hospitality and accessibility
 - Implementation of the west door as the primary point of access, to provide better visibility and connectivity to the town centre with the existing timber doors fixed open.
 - Retention of the north entrance as a secondary point of access, with the gates fixed open.
 - Provision of level access throughout the main body of the church
 - Provision of an accessible route from vehicle drop-off bays within the church site.
 - Creation of a welcome area near to the main entrance where information and resources are consolidated, alongside a food and drink preparation area.
 - Provision of accessible visitor toilets.
2. Warmth and light from low carbon energy
 - Installation of a new low temperature heating system to reduce gas use.
 - Replacement of the lighting system to reduce electricity consumption.
3. Liturgical reordering
 - Provision of more flexible spaces for worship and events by the removal of the existing fixed seating.
 - Relocation of the altar and choir stalls into the east end of the nave.
 - Reordering of the chancel for use for smaller services.
 - Reorganisation of the north transept to provide a flexible space for small meetings.

DESIGN PROPOSALS
NEW ENTRANCE

West Entrance

The most significant change proposed as part of these works is the creation of a new external narthex at the western end of the Church. The adjacent diagrams show the development of the form of this narthex, with both internal and external entrance spaces considered.

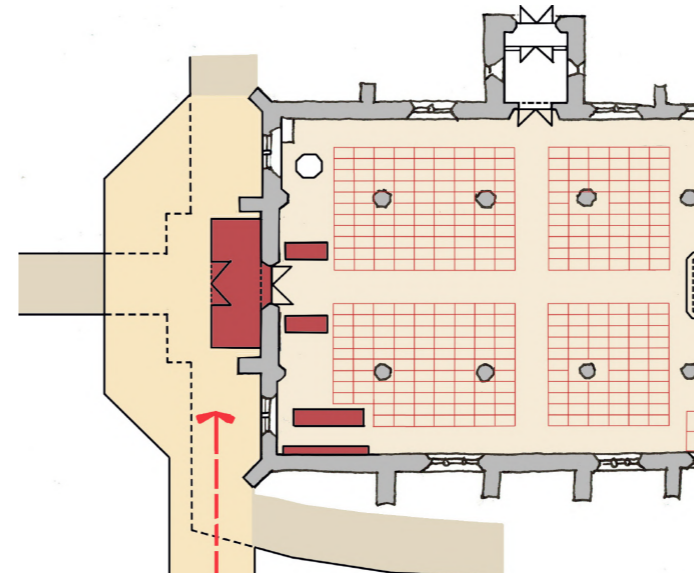
Positioning this space externally maximises the space internally and allows the church community to take full advantage of the opportunity to use this space flexibly. New doors will provide thermal comfort while allowing the existing timber doors to be fixed in an open position, providing glimpses into the Church – and through to its spectacular east windows - even when the building is closed.

Also importantly, it will house new toilet facilities in a convenient location for the congregation and visitors, allowing these to be used during services without disturbance.

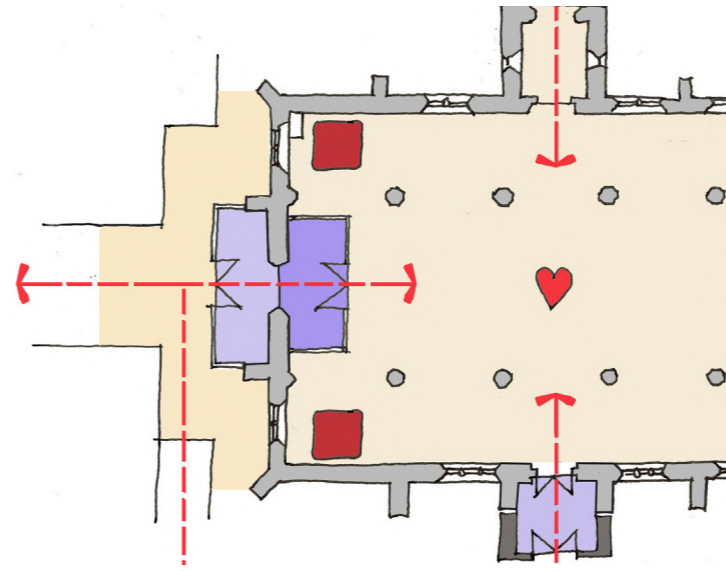
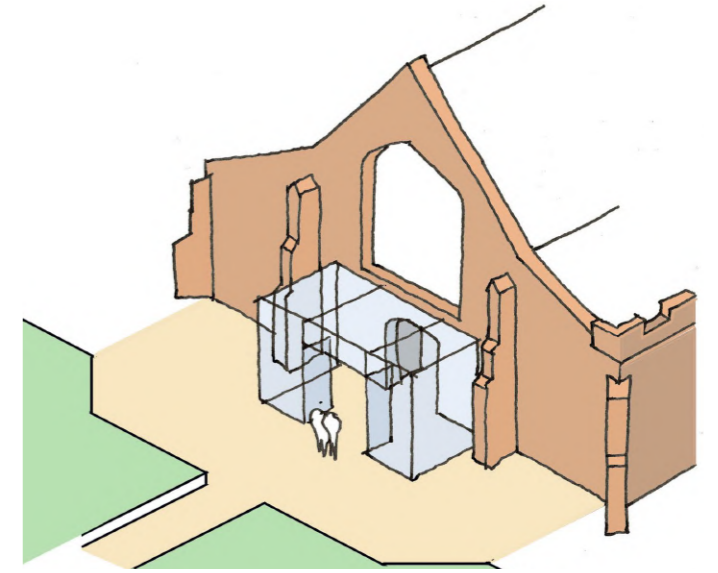
The new external walls of the narthex are proposed as red sandstone, simply detailed but with a band of inscribed lettering providing some decoration. This will be topped with a band of clerestory glazing with a lightweight metal standing seam roof above. A set of oversized glazed doors in bronzed framing will lead into the space with the route traversing below a large circular rooflight. While modest in scale, the space will be enriched by the high-quality materials and the inclusion of a laser-cut decorative timber ceiling soffit, which will cast beautiful shadows onto the floor. This will be backlit at night to provide further drama.



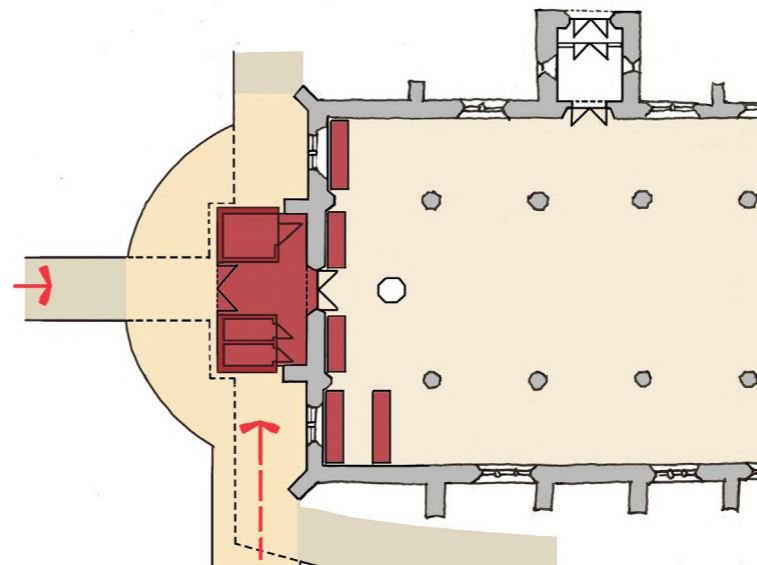
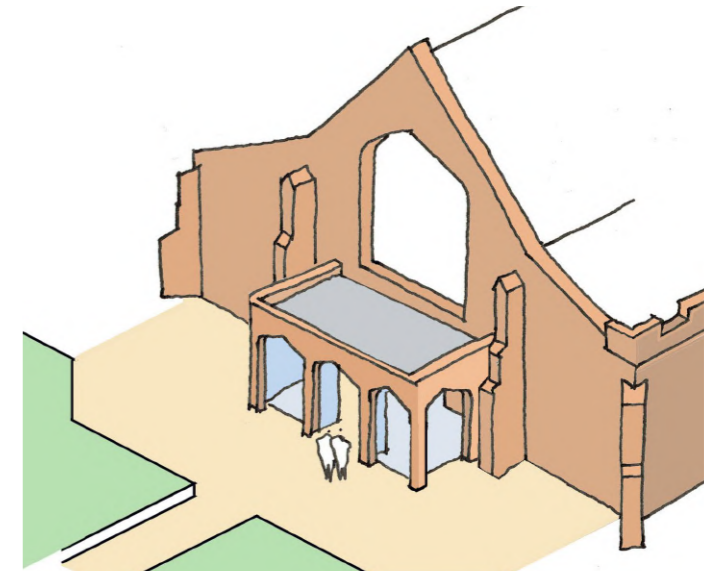
West entrance as existing



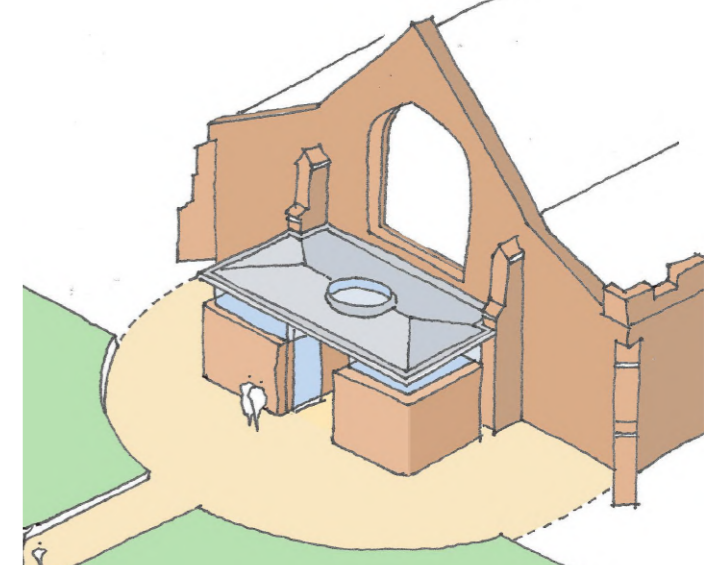
INITIAL CONCEPT



DEVELOPED PROPOSAL



PREFERRED SCHEME



DESIGN PROPOSALS
NEW ENTRANCE



VIEWS OF THE PROPOSED NEW ENTRANCE



DESIGN PROPOSALS
NEW ENTRANCE

Materials and specification

The walls will be of Red Hollington sandstone to match the existing building.

A high-quality glazing system is proposed for the doors and windows, by Secco Sistemi or similar, with a galvanised steel anodised bronze finish. The doors will be power-assisted to provide smooth operation given their large size.

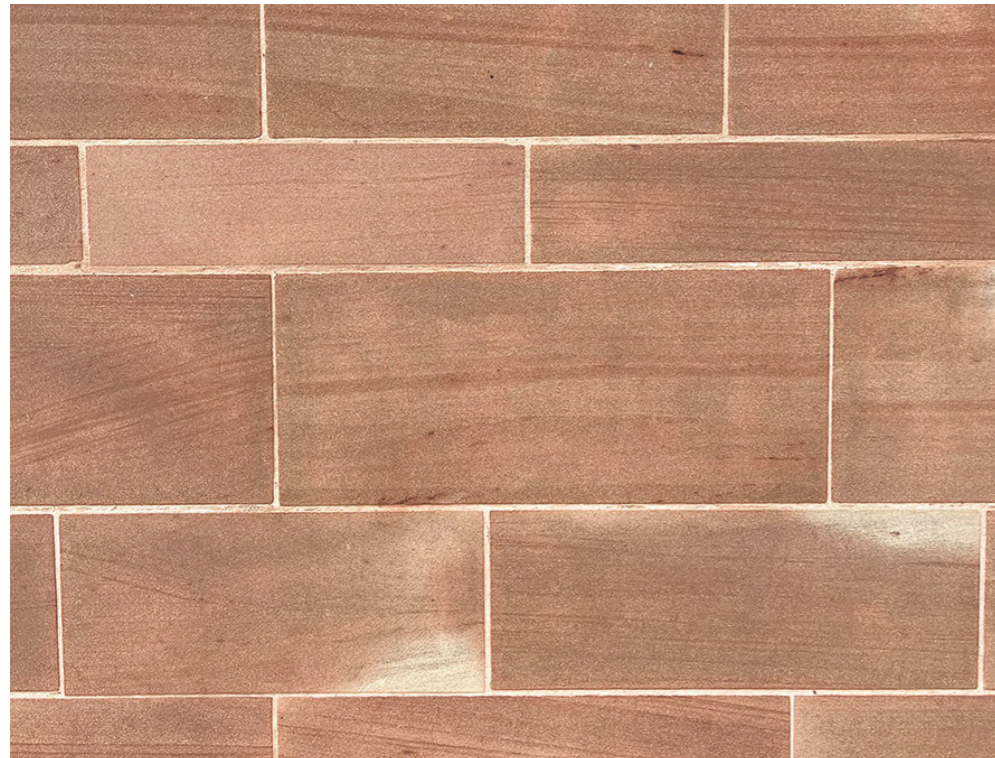
The roof will be a shallow-pitched hipped roof in a bronze-coloured pre-patinated copper (KME-TECU Bronze or similar) to match the glazing framing. A concealed gutter will run around the exposed edges of the roof with a small-diameter downpipe set back on each side elevation.

The new structure will touch the existing building lightly with glazed slots meeting the existing projecting columns and a narrow strip of glazing at the junction of the roof with the existing doorway. The enclosure will be independently supported from narrow steel columns to avoid adding load to the existing stonework, with flashings carefully dressed in below the existing sill level.

North Entrance

The existing north entrance will be retained for more occasional use. The existing decorative metalwork gates will be adjusted and fixed in the open position, facing outwards, with a new insulated glazed screen and doors fitted within the existing archway. This allows the inner oak doors to be held on the open position (re-using the existing hooks) to continue the theme of openness established at the west end. Existing bench seating and wall paneling will be supplemented with shallow storage units. Finally, the floor levels will be adjusted to remove the existing step into the body of the church.

MATERIALS PALETTE:



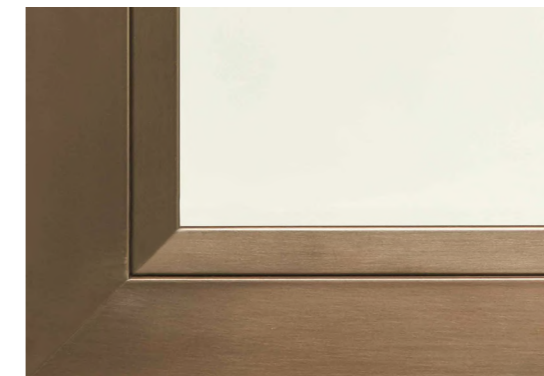
Hollington Red sandstone walls

Carved inscription



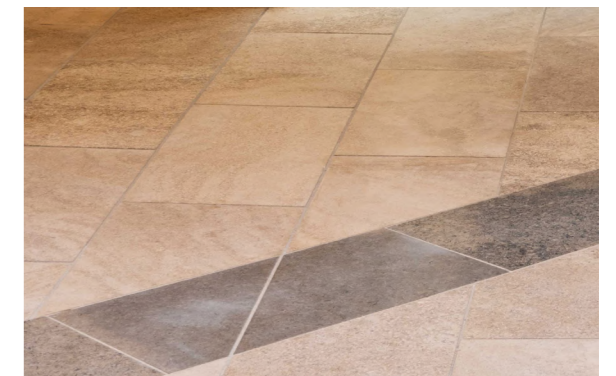
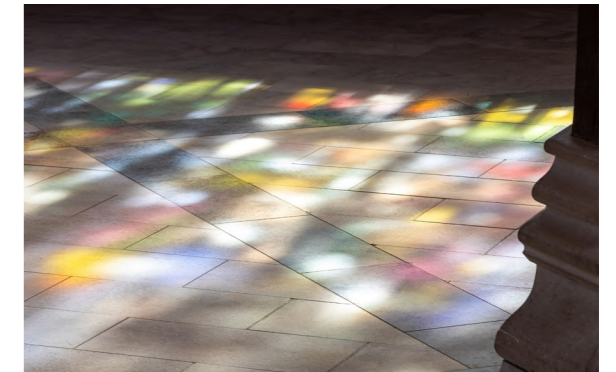
Perforated timber soffit

Copper standing seam roofing



Anodised bronze frames & fascias

Patterned pale stone floor



DESIGN PROPOSALS
INTERNAL FITTINGS



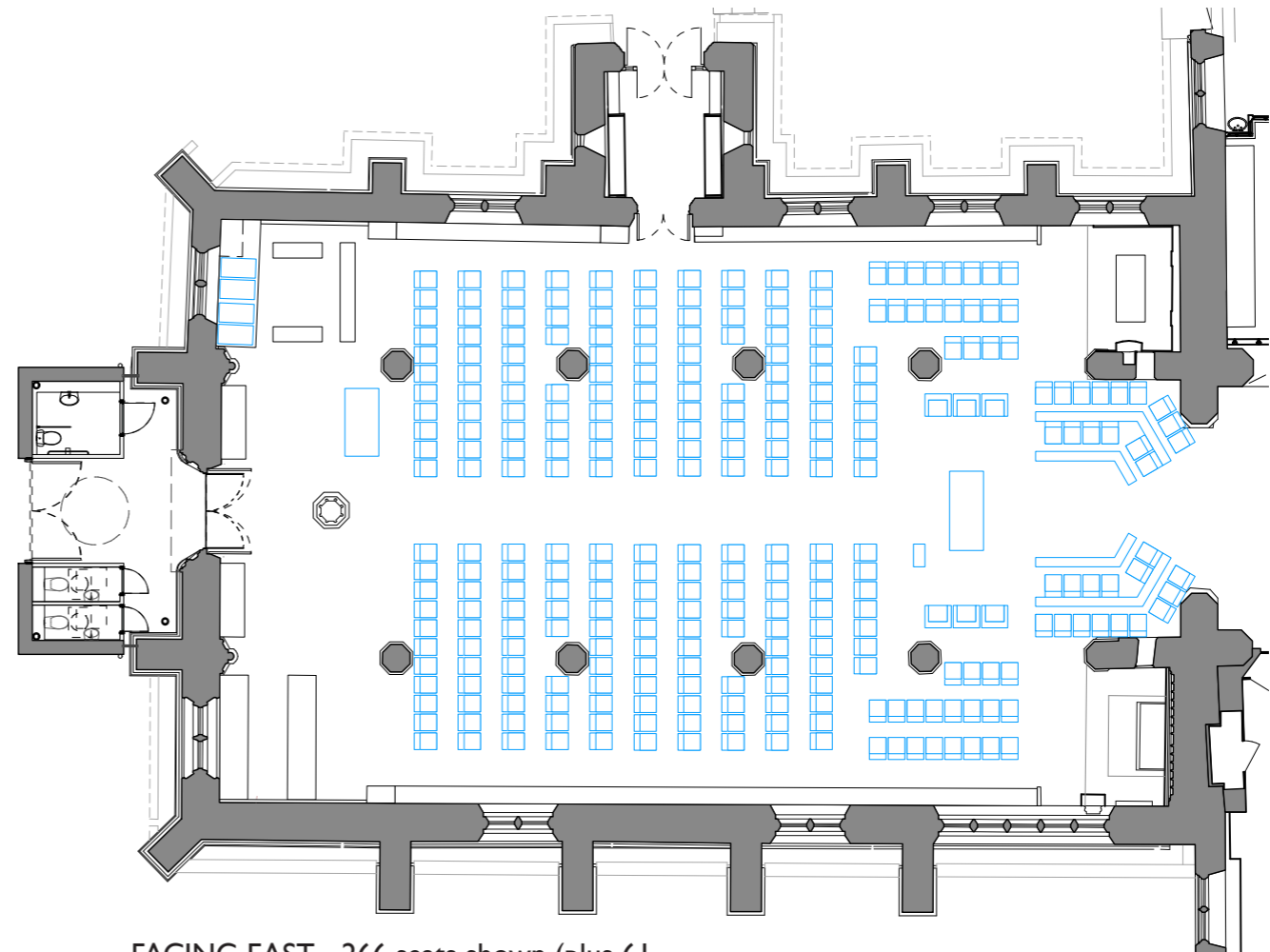
PROPOSED SECTION

DESIGN PROPOSALS
INTERNAL FITTINGS

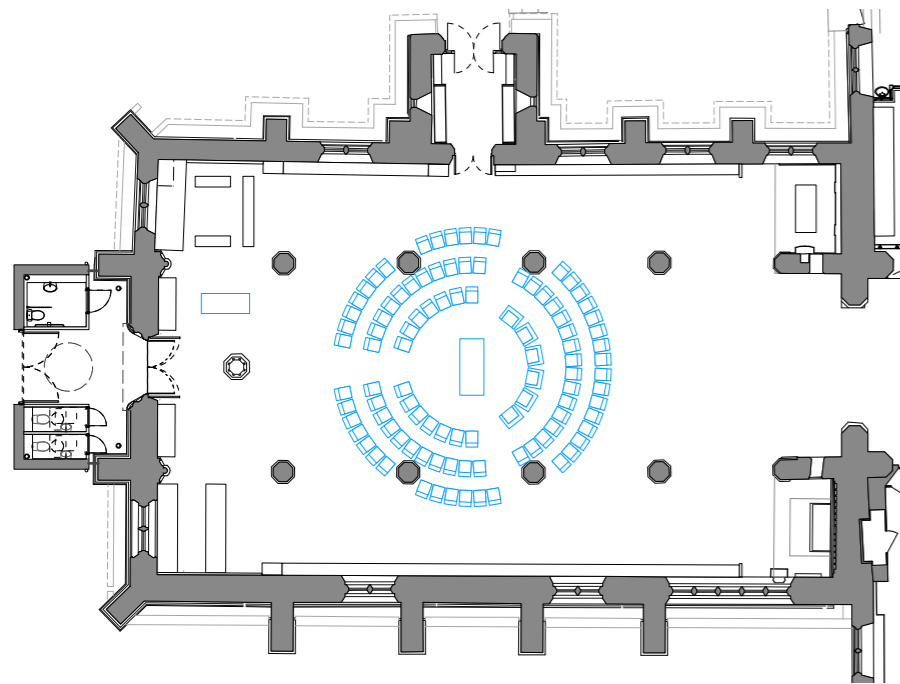
Floor

The key move in rejuvenating the internal space and creating flexibility is the removal of the existing fixed pews. These will be replaced by stackable loose seating that can be arranged in a variety of configurations, supplemented by fixed benches along the side walls to augment overall numbers. The diagrams here show the opportunities this will provide to accommodate different formats of worship, as well as community events.

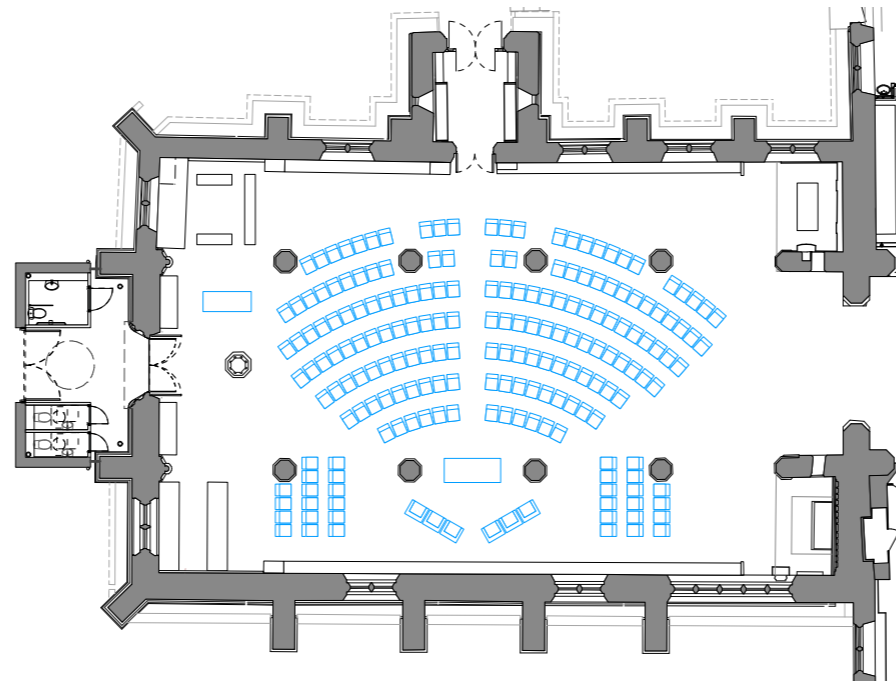
In turn, this allows the existing timber and tiled flooring to be replaced. A light-coloured stone is proposed, laid with subtle patterning over under-floor heating (as part of the Church's ambition to reduce its environmental impact). This will also incorporate service trenches to allow power and data to be delivered across the body of the nave, with socket positions at every column (discreetly hidden from the central aisle). The floor finishes drawing 1640-BFF-ZZ-00-DR-A-0211 submitted with this application shows the current proposals for underfloor services distribution, which will again support the church in new forms of use.



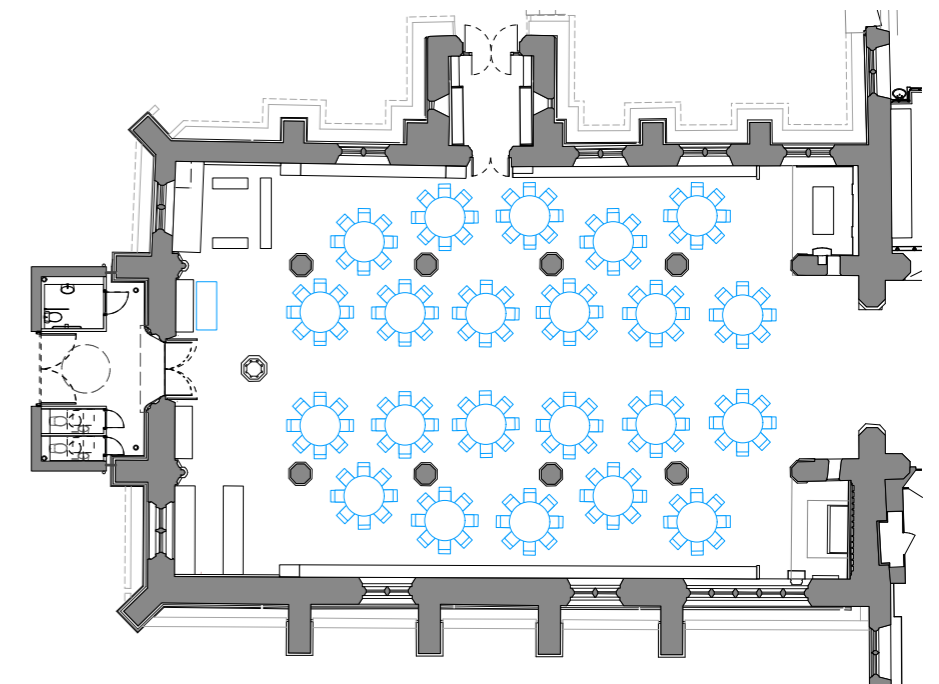
FACING EAST - 266 seats shown (plus 61 fixed seating at perimeter)



IN THE ROUND - 100 seats shown



FACING SOUTH - 192 seats shown



CABARET STYLE - 176 seats shown (22 tables of 8)

DESIGN PROPOSALS

INTERNAL FITTINGS

Nave

In response to the position of the new entrance, new interventions will be consolidated into the western bay of the nave. The existing wardens' pews will be removed and disposed of, with the Roll of Rectors retained and hung as six new panels within niches on the sacristy screen in the North Transept. Vertical timber panelling will wrap around these walls up to 2m height (keeping it below windowsill level). This will provide a unifying backdrop to the new fittings demanded by the brief: a servery and food preparation area; a stand for the display of books and cards for sale; a welcome desk, an AV desk; noticeboards and storage provision for books and chairs. The existing book stall furniture will be disposed of.

The existing Children's area furniture will be re-stained to match new interventions and relocated from the south west to the north west corner (although as this is flexible it can be relocated appropriately as required).

The servery, in the south-west corner, will be kept simple in design with a linear front counter kept clear of appliances and a rear counter with large folding doors to hide it away when not in use. In the opposite corner, a deep cupboard with panelled timber doors will provide space to store stacks of loose chairs when not in use. The large 16th Century tomb slabs mounted vertically in the SW and SE corners, identified as highly significant artefacts despite their condition, will be relocated to the north aisle either side of the entrance.

To the sides of the nave, the existing heavy-duty pipework will be replaced with smaller heating pipes, allowing heat to rise through grilles integrated into timber seating built along their length.

Existing services and switch boxes will be integrated into these new fittings to reduce the visual clutter along the walls.

Chancel

Positioning the altar and choir stalls in the east end of the nave will also necessitate the relocation of the Jacobean pulpit, the Eagle lectern and the Rector's stall from this area.

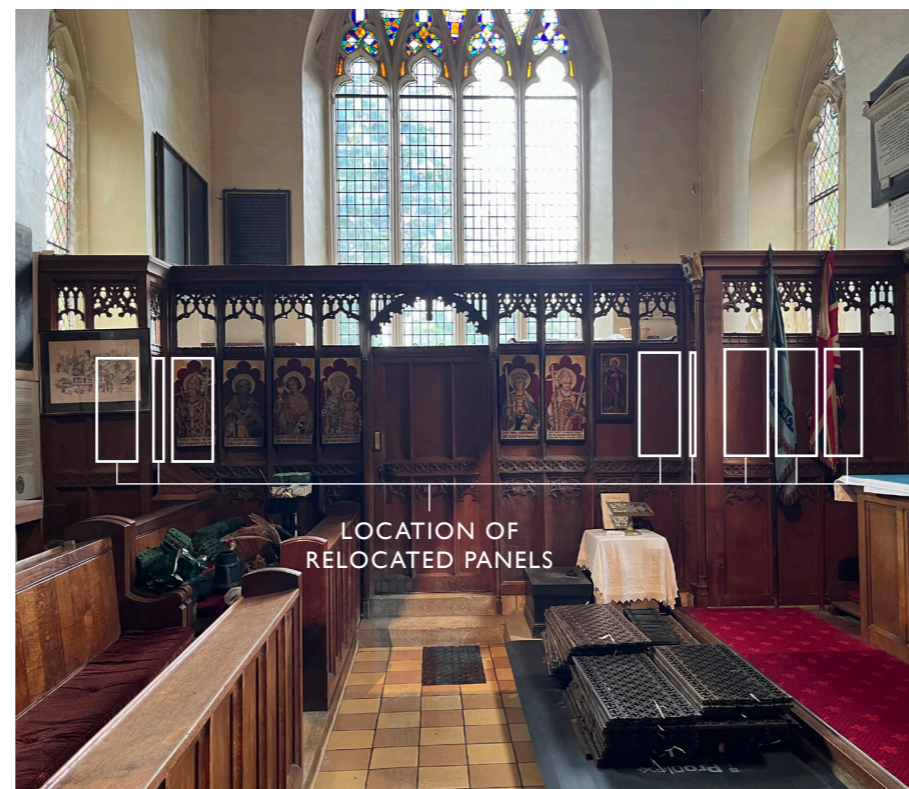
This creates the opportunity to inhabit the chancel in a new way: as a more intimate setting for smaller services. The existing choir stalls here will be adapted with the more modern sections removed to accommodate the existing server stalls, relocated from the entrance to the north transept.

The historic pulpit will be positioned to the south-east corner above a new platform to bring it to a suitable height, with the Eagle lectern placed at the north side of the sanctuary.

North transept

This space is envisaged as a flexible room for meetings or small gatherings. The floor of the north transept will be excavated and lowered marginally to provide access from the main body of the church with a minimal slope at the entrance to the space. The altar will be removed and a new stone plinth introduced to suit the new floor level. Further storage cupboards will be built into this space.

Roll of historic Rectors of Solihull are to be relocated as panels, removed from current wardens' pews. These are to be re-hung onto the sacristy screen in north transept. Six existing icons will be re-hung, three either side of the door, leaving three vacant niches to the west side of the screen and five vacant niches to the east (see photograph below with marked up locations for relocated panels).



DESIGN PROPOSALS
INTERNAL FITTINGS



INTERNAL ELEVATION - FACING WEST

DESIGN PROPOSALS
INTERNAL FITTINGS

Loose furniture design

Alongside the provision of new stackable loose seating to replace the fixed pews, a number of other furniture items will be required. These are likely to include an altar table, choir stalls, altar party chairs and a lectern. These should be sympathetic in style to the church as a whole and reflect the materiality of the new fixed internal elements. To this end, discussions have commenced with a local furniture designer/maker who has created bespoke furniture for other churches nearby.

Existing Loose Fittings

Some of the existing loose fittings within the interior will be removed for disposal: these will include the majority of the hassocks (around 20 will be retained for those wishing to make use of them) and the existing funerary candle sticks.

Existing Fixed Furniture

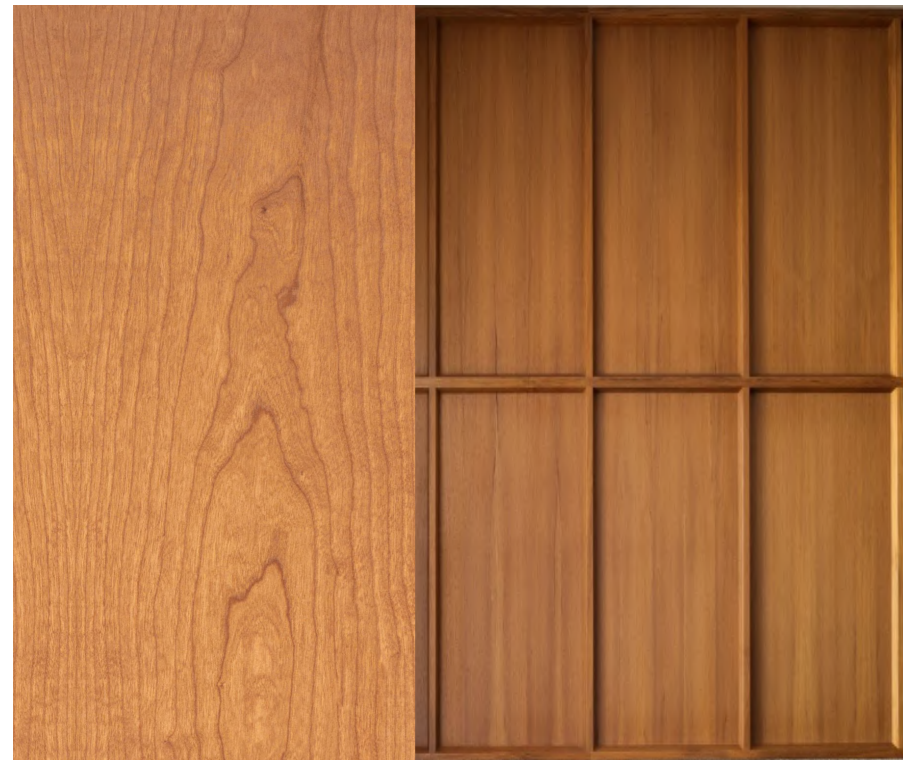
Within the existing pews to be removed, there are some elements which will be retained and incorporated into the detailing of the perimeter benching along the north and south aisles. The two pew ends for the Mayoral Pew will be re-located here as will two small memorials on the ends of existing pews (referenced in the Pew Report document). The horizontal carved dedication will also be relocated in this way.

Materials and specification

To complement the red tones of the sandstone walls, it is proposed that all the new fittings will predominantly use cherry veneer, paired with anodised bronze-coloured metal trims and skirtings. Worktops for the new kitchen and servery areas will be in a dark-coloured solid surface material to provide longevity. The loose chairs are likely to be Howe 40/4 chairs in a cherry veneer.

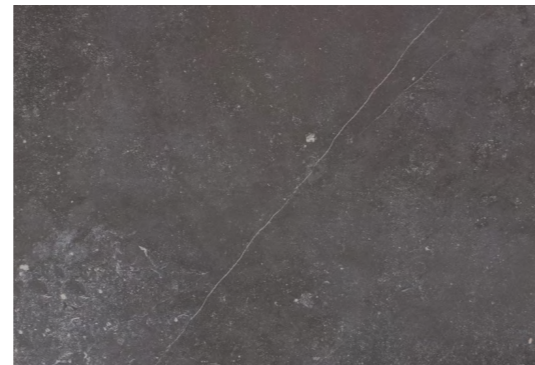
The paler floor and reduced visual clutter will greatly lift the overall feel of the internal spaces, helped significantly by the lighting improvements that have already been undertaken. The variety of lighting settings now available will also allow for a range of ambiances to suit different activities.

MATERIALS PALETTE

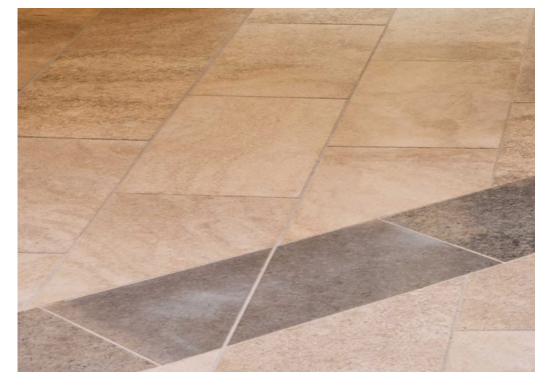
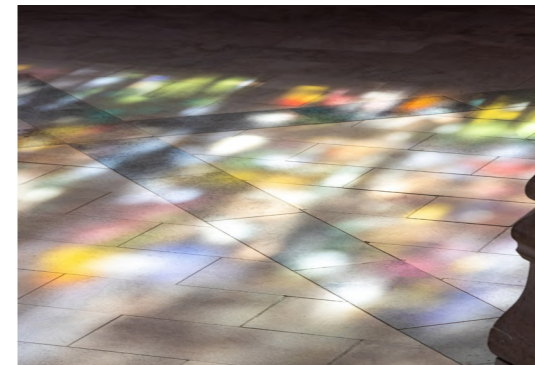


Cherry veneer - furniture & panelling

Solid surface worktops



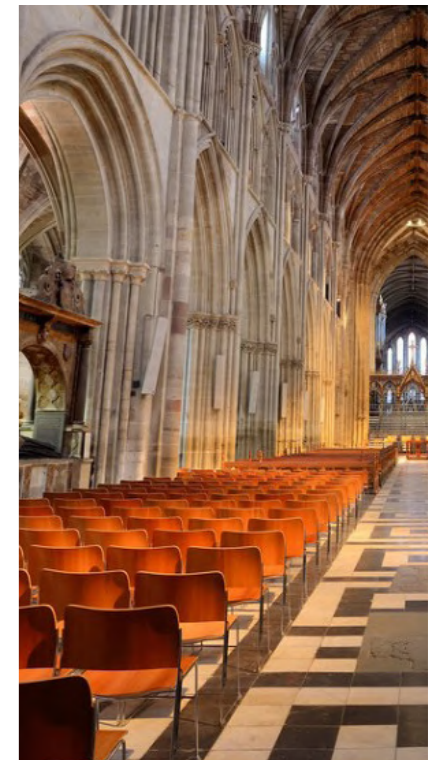
Anodised bronze skirtings & trims



Patterned pale stone floor



Howe 40/4 chair with cherry veneer finish (shown at Worcester Cathedral)



DESIGN PROPOSALS LANDSCAPE

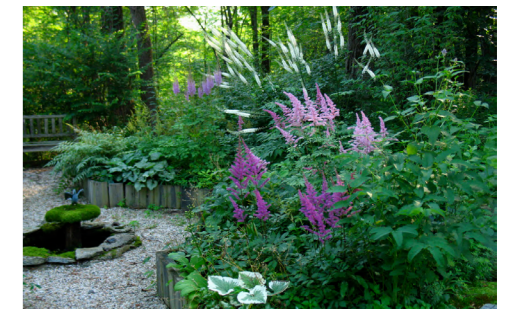
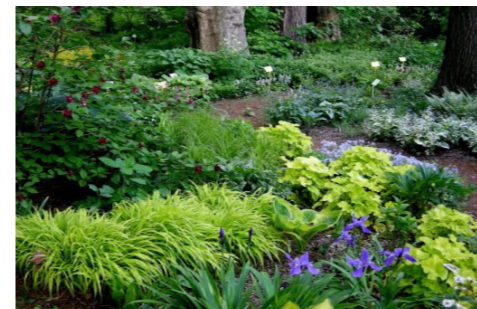
The existing landscape between the Church and the Parish Centre contains a few sizable trees but is not currently used to its best advantage, with less significant trees obstructing views of the church. The Church and churchyard sits at a higher level with no accessible route to the Parish Centre: it is only linked by a single set of steps via the parking area. Level access is only possible by leaving the site and using the Church Hill Road pavement, which is relatively narrow at this point.

The key proposal in the landscape is to establish a direct route between the new west Narthex entrance to the Church and the north front of the Parish Centre (which will be ultimately remodelled to establish this as its main entrance). While the level difference means that this route cannot avoid being stepped, a secondary level access will be established linking a drop off area and the disabled parking spaces to the new path approaching the west front of the church.

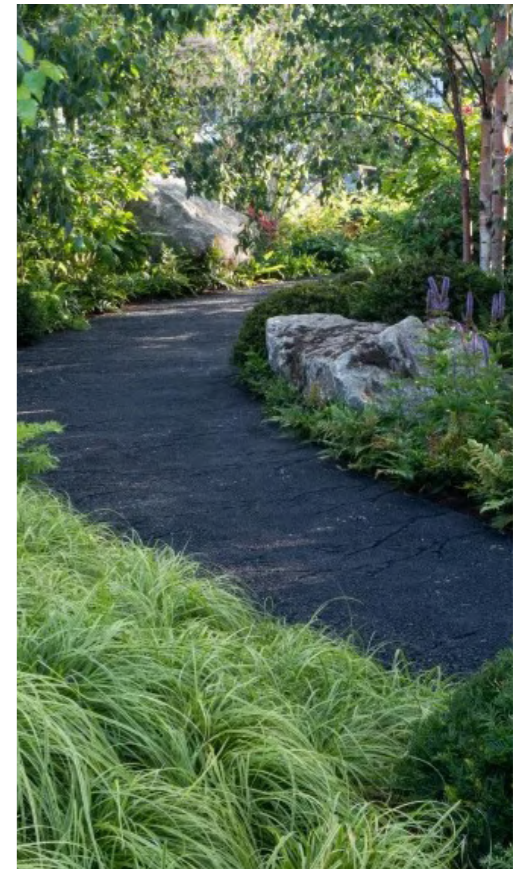
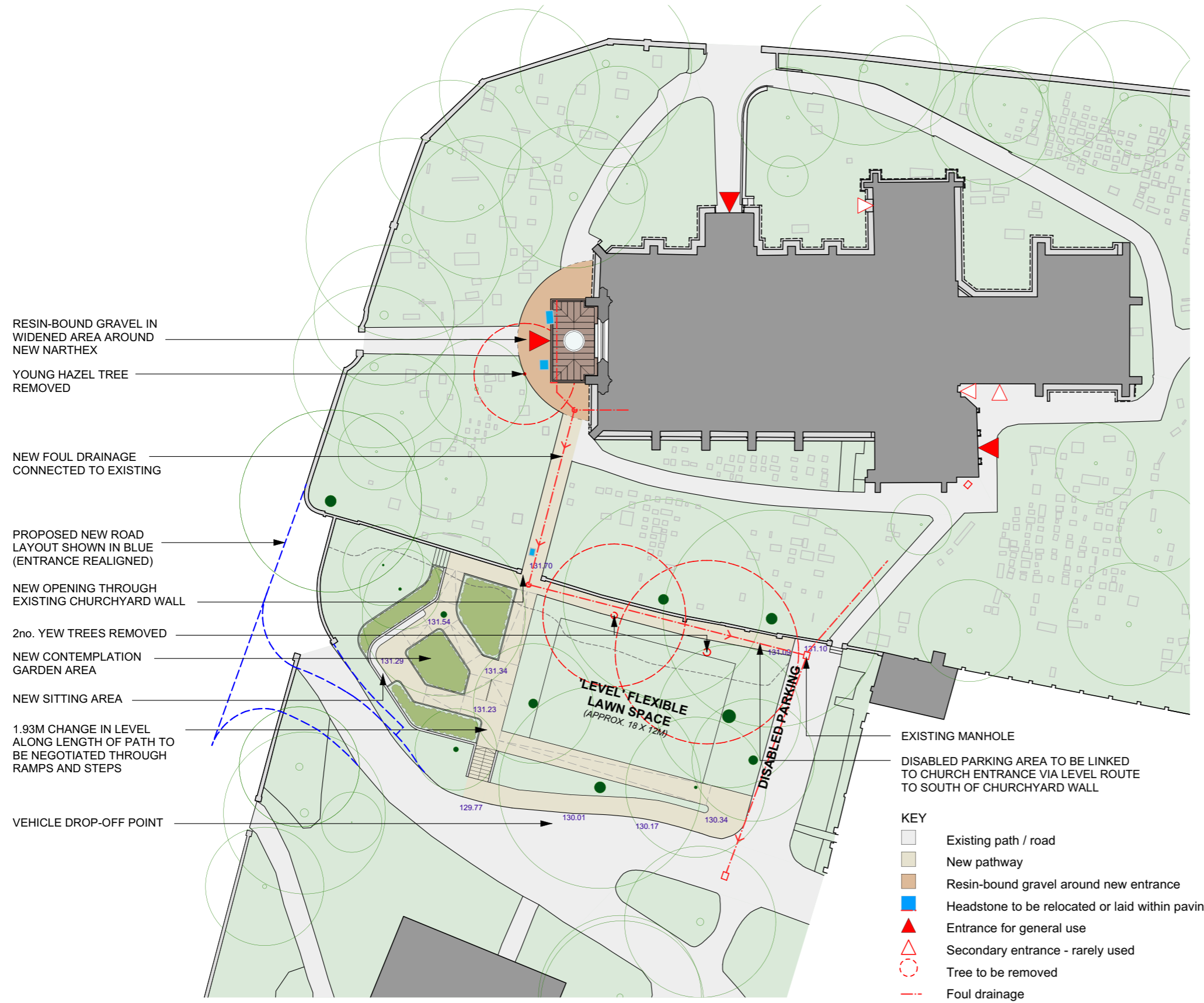
The space available offers the opportunity to retain the maximum sized open area between the existing tree trunks as a flexible space of around 18x12. West of the new path the design includes a 'Contemplation Garden' that can provide a new place of calm reflection while integrating gently sloping pathways between raised beds, which return to meet the new direct route. At the higher end of the route, the hard landscaping at the west end of the Church would be widened into a crescent to accommodate the footprint of the new narthex. These paths would be finished in a pale resin bound gravel (similar to that used recently at Lapworth).

The garden has been positioned to ensure all the significant trees in this area are retained, giving a shady woodland setting. It is envisaged that the western end would require some retaining walls to manage levels, which would be surrounded by banks of low-maintenance planting to reduce their apparent scale.

It is proposed that two Category B yew trees along the line of the churchyard wall would be removed to allow for new planting and enhanced bio-diversity in the area they previously occupied. The new accessible path linking the existing carpark to the new path to the west entrance would require the lifting of the canopy height of the existing lime trees in this area, which would also improve sight lines through the site from Church Hill (one of the key views within the conservation area).

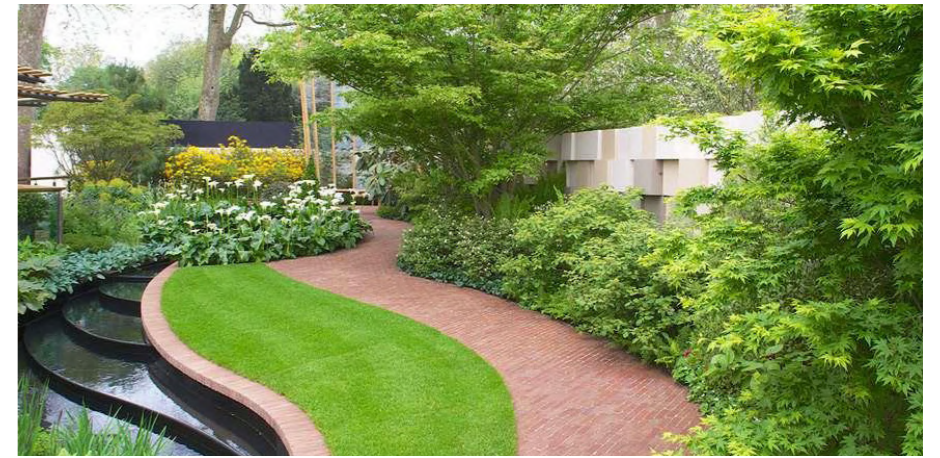
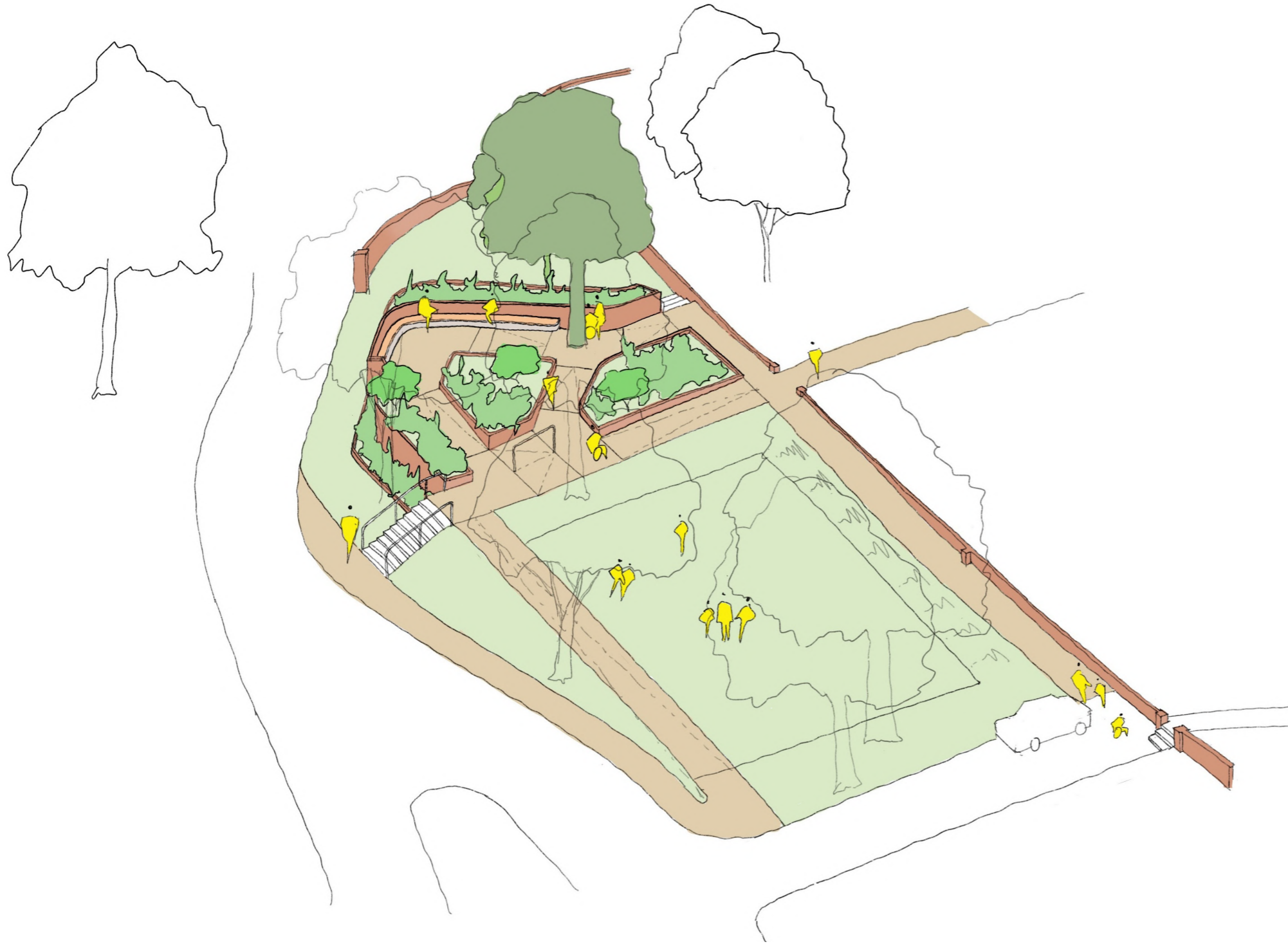


DESIGN PROPOSALS
LANDSCAPE



LANDSCAPE STRATEGY PLAN

DESIGN PROPOSALS
LANDSCAPE



LANDSCAPE ISOMETRIC DRAWING

CONCLUSION

The proposed design is a considered response to the particular significance of this building and its wider setting and aims to preserve and enhance its unique character while opening it up to a wider audience.

The modifications described will allow it to better serve the needs of its community, both now and for many years to come.

