

FAQs on Writers' Buildings Restoration and Renovation Project

1. What is the essence of the project: renovation, repositioning or restoration?

A: All of the above.

The Writers' Buildings date back to the last quarter of the eighteenth century when the main building was originally designed. The complex has gone through several extensions, additions and modifications over the centuries. With the present Greco-Roman look, the building complex received a reasonably complete shape by the end of the nineteenth century.

However, from the second half of the twentieth century in particular, due to reasons of lack of space in an age of expansion of government, there have been many unplanned (and architecturally asymmetrical) additions and alterations.

Introduction of air conditioners, all kinds of cables and ducts and unorganised wirings have added further complications. The complex is most vulnerable to fire hazards today, and there have already been a few fire incidents in recent years.

There are serious problems related to ventilation, lighting, air circulation and energy efficiency and environmental impact.

Most important, the existing arrangements are not citizen-friendly. Confusing corridors, crowded offices, poor seating, inadequate arrangements for water and sanitation, all make an ordinary visitor's life very uncomfortable.

Under the circumstances, renovation of the interiors, removal of the asymmetries, and restoration of the heritage architecture in its full splendour and making Writers' citizen friendly are integrally inter-linked.

In addition, every effort will be made to make Writers' Buildings as environmental friendly and "Green" as possible.

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2. Will it lead to change in the façade of the buildings? Will it destroy or radically alter the 'look' of the complex?

A: No.

However, changes that may have eroded the heritage character may have to be reversed. This will depend on the recommendations of the experts.

3. How does the Government propose to execute the project?

A: Public Works Department (PWD) has historically been the custodian of all major public buildings (including the Writers' Buildings) and it is PWD's job to execute projects of renovation and restoration in these buildings. However, considering the sensitive nature of the project at hand, it has been decided to involve the Departments of Architecture of the Bengal Engineering and Science University (BESU - erstwhile Bengal Engineering College, Shibpur, one of the earliest engineering colleges in India, dating back to nineteenth century) and the Jadavpur University (one of the leading Universities of the country with robust focus on engineering and architecture). The scope and TOR of the project will be finalised in consultation with them.

4. How do you propose to handle "heritage" issues ?

A: Yes, certainly. All statutory bodies relevant to the heritage issue will be consulted and their inputs taken.

5. Will inputs from others / civil society / heritage enthusiasts / experts be welcome?

A: Yes, all inputs are welcome. A dedicated website is being created for this purpose.

6. May some particular sensitivities be honoured with prior assurances?

A: Three particular prior assurances are being offered. The Archive will not be touched or affected at this stage : all due care will be taken by PWD to ensure that the Archives are fully preserved.

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The Secretariat Library will also not be touched or affected in this project: all due care will be taken to ensure that no damage is caused to the Library.

All efforts will be taken to ensure that the service records / pension papers etc of officers and staff are not shifted or affected (except in cases of Departments which are leaving the Writers' Buildings for good).

7. Why are the Departments shifting en masse?

A: Eleven Departments are shifting out of Writers' at present. This is a small part of the 30-odd Departments that are located in Writers' at present.

8. Which Departments will go? Why should only these Departments move?

A: It has been decided that the CMO, the Chief Secretary, the Home, Finance, PWD, I&CA, P&AR, L&LR, MA&ME and Agriculture Departments will move to Howrah. They have a lot of public dealings; and are involved in day-to-day functioning of the Secretariat itself.

Other Departments such as Transport have already moved out; Departments such as Tourism and MS&ME are moving out of Writers' to other buildings.

9. How will the shifting be done? Are there any standard templates?

A: The PWD will make all arrangements for fit-out of the top two floors and the common areas. They will also provide all necessary support and guidance to the other Departments who are responsible for the fit-out of their own spaces. Each Department has been provided the services of an Executive Engineer of the PWD for this purpose. As far as possible, standard templates and designs will be utilised so as to save time and money.

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10. Will the move inconvenience Government employees? Are there any arrangements for improving connectivity at the new site?

A: As with any change in the status quo, the move will require a phase of familiarisation and adjustment. The Government is, however, planning ahead so that there will be sufficient public transport with adequate infrastructure at the new site. The PWD is also liaising with all agencies to ensure that telecommunication facilities are put in place and activated before the move.

11. Could the project not be undertaken without such large-scale shifting?

A: The question was considered and indeed, a Committee headed by the then Chief Secretary Shri Samar Ghosh had recommended phase-wise shifting. But the increasing congestion, the aggravating vulnerabilities / hazards and the practical constraints involved in implementation of a comprehensive time-bound project have led to a partial rethink.

12. What arrangements are envisaged at the Mandirtala building?

A: All the systems and facilities that are presently in place at Writers' Buildings will also be instituted at Mandirtala. These include parking, fire safety, communications (including telecommunication and Internet connectivity), sanitation, security, transport, common access and facilities for visitors. In fact, the new building provides the space and opportunity to make better arrangements for common facilities and for the convenience of visitors.

13. How much will the whole project cost?

A: The cost can be estimated only after the concept plan and scope of work are finalised.

14. The cost incurred for creation of office infrastructure at Howrah during this interregnum will surely be a waste?

A: No. The entire infrastructure which is now being created at Howrah will be gainfully utilised.