

# Protecting theatres for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/3942

20 June 2018

Angela Leckie  
City Centre Team  
Planning  
Growth and Neighbourhoods Directorate  
Manchester City Council  
Floor 6 Town Hall Extension  
Albert Square  
P.O Box 532,  
Manchester,  
M60 2LA

By e-mail: [a.leckie@manchester.gov.uk](mailto:a.leckie@manchester.gov.uk)

**Applications:** 119890/VO/2018 & 119892/JO/2018

**Sites:** Starlight Theatre, Water Street, Manchester; & Colonnaded Viaduct Manchester

**Proposals:** City Council Development of a new flexible arts and events space comprising a range of activities including theatre, music, dance, art, other performance and non-performance related events, exhibitions and conferences (Sui Generis) with ancillary facilities including retail exhibitions and conferences (Sui Generis) with ancillary facilities including retail and bar uses (Use Classes A1 and A3), offices, administrative and back of house functions (Use Class B1), training and educational facilities (Use Class D1), servicing and access arrangements, highways works, creation of new public realm, removal of 4 trees, cycle parking and provision of new plant and associated works. Demolition of the Starlight Theatre, existing workshop and other structures and perimeter wall and alterations to the Grade II listed Colonnaded Railway Viaduct. (Amendment of application ref no 114294/VO/2016 approved in January 2017); &

Application to vary conditions 2 (Approved Dwgs) and 4 (Archaeology) attached to application ref no 114370 to reflect minor changes to the approved scheme including slight movement in location and reduction in number of penetrations to arches to deliver the structural solution; refinement of the internal layout arrangements and re-location of the potential link through the arch to the Museum of Science and Industry Estate.

## **Remit:**

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in England through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, requiring the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include

## **Theatres Trust**

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

**T** 020 7836 8591

**F** 020 7836 3302

**E** [info@theatrestrust.org.uk](mailto:info@theatrestrust.org.uk)

**W** [theatrestrust.org.uk](http://theatrestrust.org.uk)

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'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

**Comments:**

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on the above applications. We provided detailed comments on the previous permitted application (114294/VO/2016) whereby we supported the principle of development but raised a number of concerns regarding the design and internal layout of the proposed venue. We had a positive meeting with the Architect in September 2017 to discuss potential changes to the direction of the scheme, although we have not been presented with any further plans or been engaged in any pre-application discussions or advisory reviews since that time. We welcome that revisions to the original scheme have been put forward and that we now have an opportunity to provide further comment to help ensure this ambitious and significant new project for Manchester is a success.

With specific regards to application reference 119892/JO/2018 we note plans/layouts for the shop/ticket office, cloak room and toilets are also included within 119890/VO/2018 and are therefore covered within our overall comments. We have no objection to the revision of penetrations and re-location of the potential future link to the Museum of Science and Industry.

Our detailed comments are set out below.

Capacity

The primary change to the theatre element is a reduction in seated audience capacity, from around 1,600 to 1,520. We consider this to provide for a better audience/performer relationship and also facilitates a revised shape to the theatre which is much simplified.

Access

We would expect access provision within a new build theatre of such high profile to reflect current best practice. We recognise and accept that design ambition and site restraints have resulted in the need to place the auditorium above ground level. It is disappointing however that, as the Access Statement notes, it has **not** been possible to comply with Building Regulations Approved Documents, let alone best practice guidance, in relation to escape stair widths (both public stairs and the stairs to the orchestra pit) and wheelchair seating locations in the theatre (which are restricted by escape travel distances and strategy). We would also expect a new theatre to provide inclusive access for wheelchair users allowing them the same journey from entrance to seat as ambulant members of the audience, but this is not reflected within current plans.

The re-design process has enabled the front of house entrance lift to be extended to serve all levels of the auditorium, however the lift appears small for the 15 wheelchair users that could be using it. We would encourage recognition of the needs of other audience members with difficulties managing stairs, as this will provide further pressure on the lift capacity available. This could be addressed by slightly extending the building envelope along the theatre's southern elevation.

With regards to evacuation of wheelchair users and other members of the audience who may require assistance during evacuation, it is noted that the documentation suggests the possible use of firefighting lifts for evacuation is to be explored, however suggests a reliance on evacuation chairs. Again, we would consider that a new build theatre of this high profile should be providing evacuation lifts rather than a reliance on evacuation chairs which require dedicated members of trained staff on hand at all times.

It is also noted that the current design provides only one wheelchair accessible WC within the theatre and that this is on a separate level to all wheelchair seating positions. We strongly urge that this is reviewed at the next stage of design and that additional WCs are located in positions easily accessed from auditorium seating locations.

### Auditorium Seating

The reduction in seating has potential to improve the audience/performer relationship, however it is unclear from the documentation whether the original ambition to provide flexible stalls seating to allow for a faceted or curved arrangement of seats can be accommodated. The proposals currently only indicate straight row seating which is akin to a cinema arrangement, providing poorer sightlines and serving to exacerbate the distance between audience and performer. It also reduces rather than improves the relationship amongst the audience, another factor that is key in theatre design. There is a strong view that 'papering' the auditorium with audience faces through curved seating rows and audience seating on the side walls where traditionally boxes or slips would have been provided gives a better and a more focussed and much preferred relationship between audience and performer. Whilst we appreciate that the side walls are required to be flexible to allow the stage to be brought forward for when the theatre is operating independently of the warehouse, we strongly recommend that the allowance of a flexible curved/faceted seating arrangement is retained within the proposals.

Linked to this point is a query regarding the acoustics of the space and whether there will be a reliance on amplified sound within the theatre, particularly when in 'XXL' format. Given the volume of the space, we would welcome reassurance that the theatre is capable of facilitating opera and other performances without amplified sound.

### Orchestra Pit

The current documents do not make clear whether the orchestra pit lift has been retained. We strongly encourage such provision as it is essential for movement of large orchestral instruments (for example grand pianos and timpani). For a theatre being built with a large pit capacity clearly with the ambition of presenting full-scale operas, the lack of a pit lift will create a large operational burden. A pit lift is preferable to a platform lift given the amount of equipment to be moved. We also note there is no indicated provision for instrument storage near the pit and query where this facility will be located.

Regarding access to the orchestra pit, it is noted that musicians will need to use the front of house (main entrance) lift to access the orchestra pit potentially creating even greater pressure

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on the relatively small front of house lift discussed previously.

#### Performer Facilities

There are no stage-side performer facilities identified adjacent to the theatre stage. The nearest performer WC facilities appear to be located at stage level within the back of house tower, a considerable distance from the stage when the theatre is in independent use from the warehouse space. Again, we urge this to be reviewed at the next stage of design and recommend implementation of a wheelchair-accessible WC facility (preferably with shower) close to the theatre stage.

Whilst it is always desirable to provide an accessible dressing room adjacent to the stage and at stage level, it is noted that this will be purpose built if necessary as it would for quick-change facilities and may not always be possible dependent on individual stage arrangements.

We remain concerned about the distance between the stage and the dressing rooms which are located within the tower block. However, we understand that this is an early design and operational decision and one which the operator is satisfied that they can manage. Likewise we have reservations about the decision not to provide separate performer and audience access.

#### Audience flow and facilities

The flow of people around the venue will be central to its success. We do have concern regarding the restricted width of entrance doors and the adjacent vertical circulation (see also earlier point regarding lift size). We understand that there are constraints imposed by site boundaries, however it is important that entrance and audience flow are not compromised particularly as a positive first experience of the theatre aspect will encourage repeat custom and usage of the venue.

In addition to reviewing the lift size, we would urge the design team to review the pinch point created at level 2 at the stalls cross-over entrance juncture with the lift lobby. Currently it appears tight and could cause problems between wheelchair users moving towards the bar and contra to other audience members entering the auditorium.

Within the theatre there is only one set of WCs (within which as noted previously there is just one disabled WC). This is not considered best practice and could further exacerbate congestion particularly during busy intervals. We would recommend that options are explored for installing additional WCs on each level of the theatre.

#### Wayfinding

The document notes our concern about the visibility of the entrance to the theatre from the main foyer, and that this will be reviewed in the next stage of design. This will be an important next phase of design and orientation of the internal division between the theatre and foyer will need consideration alongside lighting and signage. It will be important that the theatre entrance is not over-crowded by the entrances to the foyer WCs adjacent, and to ensure that signage and ways

of highlighting the theatre entrance are not lost within the overall exuberance of the foyer space and need to wayfind to, for example, WCs and foyer bars.

We would also recommend that the design team and client review future flexibility with regards a secondary entrance within the 'leg' of the theatre. Whilst we appreciate that the current operation requires audiences to enter the building via the main shared foyer space, this may well change in the future. It is noted that the size and number of lifts within the northern-most (orange) leg has been reduced during this redesign. The ability to future proof the building to allow separate theatre access from the riverside plaza is strongly recommended and would be welcomed.

It is also noted that this site is one of the few opportunities to provide waterside public space in Manchester, and we would question whether an opportunity is being missed to activate the river frontage that could be reconsidered.

### Construction

The cost of long term maintenance should be factored in and ensure that the materials selected are durable and appropriate. Design life / length of guarantee of materials will be an important factor in these decisions, in particular in the selection of the single ply material covering the theatre shell, some products of which have very limited guarantees. It will also be necessary to ensure adequate fire retardance of the single ply membrane when using as a wall covering rather than as a roofing material as is more traditional.

### Lighting Access

It is unclear from the information available whether the grid above the stage is a fully accessible grid. The theatre is designed to be flexible but if reliant on overstage lighting bars rather than grid access when the stage is in thrust format it will be restrictive; for example requiring the bars to be rigged at stage level, hoisted and then focussed remotely. This will have the effect of limiting the lighting fixtures that can be used and increase equipment costs as most lights do not have this feature. It would also be a particular issue for touring productions who may tour with their own equipment or require specific lighting effects which cannot be achieved with the in-house equipment.

### Future operation

As per our previous response we recommend the thorough documentation of the design decision process and that, if not already employed, a Client Decision Schedule is maintained so that any future operator and management teams understand the logic behind the building layout and how it is best managed.

### Conclusion

We are pleased to note that some of the Trust's original concerns have been addressed and there have been more general improvements within this iteration of the scheme including get-in

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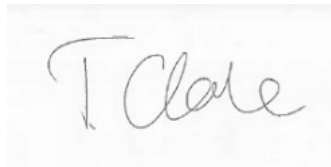
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arrangements, bar facilities and improved WC locations. However, we still have some outstanding concerns and request that the Council carefully considers our comments with their Architect, design team and future operator and that they are given due consideration during the next design phase. We accept it will not be possible to address all concerns due to design, budgetary or other limitations and constraints. However, we would highlight in particular that as a new-build venue within a project of such great prominence we would expect compliance with best practice and building control regulations in relation to access. Disabled provision for audience members, staff and performers must at least meet minimum standards, as we have outlined above and as is referenced within the Design and Access Statement. We suggest revisions at the earliest opportunity to ensure that these points are addressed.

We continue to welcome the scheme, but cannot fully support the granting of planning permission for application 119890/VO/2018 unless access standards and regulations are met. As stated in our introduction, we have no objection to 119892/JO/2018 and recommend its approval.

We look forward to continued consultation on this site and refinement of proposals, and encourage stakeholders to engage the Trust during any future design reviews and pre-application discussions. Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or if you wish to discuss our comments further.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'T Clarke', is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

Tom Clarke  
National Planning Adviser