

Owning a listed theatre: Five points of reference

Summary

This note looks at the implications of owning a listed theatre building and provides advice on how to approach any necessary maintenance and building works / alterations that you may wish to make.

Who is this note for?

This advice note is aimed at community / volunteer groups, theatre operators / owners and local authorities.

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A theatre is listed when it is of special architectural or historic interest in a national context. Listed theatres have extra legal protection in the planning system. If your theatre is listed, it means there are additional planning controls that apply to the building both inside and out and therefore it cannot be altered or extended without the express consent of the local planning authority, obtained through a listed building consent.

However, alterations and extensions are possible, even to Grade I listed buildings, and many theatre owners successfully carry out building works to update operational standards and bring their historically-significant venues in line with current building regulations and modern day audience expectations. This note looks at the implications of owning a listed theatre building and provides advice on how to approach any necessary maintenance and building works / alterations that you may wish to make.

1. Find out the grading of your listed theatre

The first step is to find out what grading the theatre has and which areas of the building are considered to be of special historic significance, as this may restrict what you are able to do. In general terms the higher the grading, the more restricted the works. It is a criminal offence to make alterations / carry out building works to any listed building without listed building consent, regardless of category / grade. You can start to find out what is special about your theatre by checking its entry on the list description.

The following grades of listing are used to show the level of special interest of a theatre in England and Wales:

- Grade I buildings are of exceptional interest (just 2.5% of all listed buildings are Grade I listed)
- Grade II* buildings are particularly important buildings of more than special interest (just under 6% of listed buildings are Grade II*)
- Grade II buildings are of special interest (over 90% of listed buildings are Grade II listed and this is the most common grade for many theatres)

In Scotland, it is slightly different; buildings are put into one of three listing categories according to their relative importance:

- Category A: Buildings of national or international importance, either architectural or historic; or fine, little-altered examples of some particular period, style or building type
- Category B: Buildings of regional or more than local importance; or major examples of some particular period, style or building type, which may have been altered
- Category C: Buildings of local importance; lesser examples of any period, style or building type, as originally constructed or moderately altered; and simple, traditional buildings that group well with other listed buildings

In Northern Ireland, similar to Scotland, buildings are put into one of four listing categories according to their relative importance:

- Grade A: Special buildings of national importance including grand buildings and the fine, little altered examples of some important style or date
- Grade B+: Special buildings that might have merited A status but have minor detracting features such as impurities of design, or lower quality additions or alterations. This grade also applies to buildings that stand out from Grade B1 buildings because of exceptional interiors or some other features

- Grade B1 and B2: Special buildings of more local importance or good examples of some period of style. Some degree of alteration or imperfection may be acceptable.

2. Check with your local council to make changes

If you plan to do work to a listed theatre, do not make any assumptions. For a highly-graded theatre, even the smallest of alteration may require listed building consent. Listed building consent is similar to planning permission in terms of process but no fees are involved. There is no time limit for enforcement of works that have not been given permission. This could include being made to go through the listed building consent process retrospectively and / or planning permission with the possibility that you may have to return the building to its previous state or criminal proceedings. Therefore it is vital that all works other than simple like-for-like repair and maintenance has been granted consent. Other local authority consent may also be required such as building regulation approval or advertisement consent.

Listed building consent is required for all works of demolition, alteration or extension to a listed building that affect its character as a building of special architectural or historic interest. The listed status pertains to the entire property so both internal and external alterations may require consent. Listing can also cover structures in the building's curtilage (for example paintframe workshops or managers' flats within the site boundary) as well as structures and/or objects fixed to the listed building so it is critical to establish the area covered by the listing at an early stage. The listing may also arise from the contribution the building makes to a group of buildings of which it is a part.

The listing description of a building provides a valuable indication of which areas of your building are considered significant, but just because a specific feature is not mentioned it does not mean it is not of interest – speak with your local authority Conservation Officer / Heritage Specialist and the Theatres Trust. Also remember that it isn't just decorative features that give rise to listing – a building can be listed for architectural and / or historic interest. For example, the specific interest may be to do with the design and layout, use of an innovative technology or because the building is a good example of our national social/cultural history. For further information relating to listing refer to the advice note [Protecting theatre buildings through listing](#).

If a feature is specifically mentioned in the list description, it may be more difficult to make changes, although not impossible – refer to [case study below for the Theatre Royal Drury Lane](#). Each council tends to differ in its approach to what is and is not acceptable in terms of alterations, extensions or renovations to listed theatres. Therefore, the local authority Conservation Officer will be one of your most important points of contact. Generally, they are employees of the local council and their role is to ensure the character of the building is preserved. They are the officer who will make recommendations towards the granting or refusal of consent to make changes to your theatre. They may even indicate the materials and techniques that you should use to make these changes.

In the case of theatre buildings, the Theatres Trust should also be consulted. Through our expert knowledge of theatre buildings and theatre operation, we are able to provide an informed judgement on proposed works, including those changes necessitated by operational requirements which can impact on listed features/areas of historic significance. We encourage theatre operators/owners to contact us to discuss their proposals before submitting a listed building consent application so that any issues/areas of difficulty can be reviewed and resolved prior to an application being submitted. For a small fee, we can also arrange an Advisory Review service, which is a day-long, in-depth review of building proposals by a selected panel of professional experts. Examples of schemes that have used

this service to help them are outlined in the [case studies](#) below. Theatres Trust also has good relations with the other statutory consultees and heritage bodies and is able to engage their views at an early stage.

Preparing to carry out a capital project or extensive development can be expensive. To help you minimise the cost of this process, the Trust would normally recommend you undertake a pre-application with the local authority (in consultation with us). Pre-application advice is provided by Planning Officers employed by the council, which outlines how they are likely to determine any subsequent listed building and / or planning application, and any changes that are likely to be needed, if any, to give your scheme the best chance of being granted a permission. The guidance given is informal advice and does not bind the council in any future decision it makes. However, in our experience where pre-application advice is obtained and incorporated into any scheme, developments are more likely to obtain consent and decisions are made significantly faster.

The local authority, where necessary, will consult with the appropriate heritage statutory consultees including Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland, Cadw and the Northern Ireland Historic Environment Division. The local authority will also consult the appropriate heritage organisation for its advice for example the Georgian Group, Victorian Society and Twentieth Century Society etc – on applications to listed buildings.

In summary, do not shy away from making changes to a listed theatre building – you are simply managing a cultural building and all sorts of things will get approved if they are handled sensitively.

3. Get professional advice

It is important to obtain expert advice when considering alterations and repairs to a listed theatre. The involvement of a consultant / team of consultants who understand the history and development of a theatre and are sensitive to the historical significance of the building is not only an important part of the process of gaining the necessary consents, but can be a clarifying and inspiring part of the change process for you as custodian of a listed theatre. It can help you understand why specific design features exist (or do not exist), why they may be significant and how you can work with these to better the operator and audience experience.

You are strongly advised to use the professional services of architects, surveyors and consultants who specialise in historic theatre buildings. Surveyors can provide advice on the structural condition of the buildings fabric, and works required for its maintenance and repair. Architects are able to provide similar advice but it is particularly important to obtain their specialist advice where alterations and repairs have an effect on historic detail and design.

Theatres Trust can advise on consultants who have carried out similar works on recent projects.

4. Repairs and maintenance

Historic theatres are likely to rely on a lot of maintenance and it is important to prioritise and budget for this. Priority should be given to keeping the building dry, as water ingress can cause a lot of problems. Every theatre should undertake some form of survey or 'quinquennial inspection'. A quinquennial inspection is a five-yearly look at the theatre building to see what condition it is in and to set out what repairs are needed. The report will highlight works that are urgent and need to be done immediately and those which can wait a little longer but will need attention. The report will assess items such as the integrity and effectiveness of the roof coverings, gutters, downpipes and drains. If you are carrying out minor repairs, such as repointing, these are unlikely to need listed building consent if they are like-for-like, however, it is always advisable to check with your local Conservation Officer. When doing work, be aware that specialist materials might be required and specialist finishes may be costlier. Restoring original features can require a specialist tradesperson, which can add another layer of expense. An example of this is the survey and maintenance of historic fibrous plaster ceilings, which requires both a structural engineer with specialist knowledge of this form of construction and an historic plaster specialist to survey – for further guidance refer to [Historic England's interim guidance document for the care and management of fibrous plaster in the UK](#), which the Theatres Trust was involved in researching and drafting.

5. Conservation Management Plan

Faced with the challenges and opportunities of working with a historic theatre, many theatre owners begin by commissioning a Conservation Management Plan (CMP). This is a document that sets out the significance of a heritage asset, and how that significance will be retained in any future use, management, alteration or repair. A plan helps you care for the theatre by making sure you understand what matters and why before you take major decisions.

The CMP also explains the significance of the asset and examines how any future use, management, alteration or repair will be carried out in order to retain that significance. It informs the way an asset is conserved and managed, by establishing why the asset matters and what matters about it. CMPs help to manage the often many different features and diverse interests that need to be considered in relation to historic assets.

CMPs do not necessarily need to be lengthy documents. Instead they should be compiled and structured so that they can be easily-referenced by those managing the building. A CMP provides a holistic view, collating issues and plans. A CMP should be well-illustrated, with key issues highlighted in diagrams.

Everybody working or managing a theatre can work in collaboration to prepare CMPs, with the assistance of expert consultants if necessary. The stages involved in creating a CMP might include:

- Deciding why the CMP is needed and how it will be used
- Identifying stakeholders
- Understanding the asset
- Assessing the significance of the asset
- Exploring relevant issues
- Setting policy aims and objectives
- Implementing the CMP
- Monitoring and reviewing the CMP

Case studies

Theatre Royal Drury Lane: Grade I listed – major refurbishment project

Planning permission and listed building consent were granted in 2018 for a major refurbishment project, which included changes to listed fabric, including alterations and demolition within the auditorium and stage house. This involved reshaping of the Royal and Grand circles to provide an improved connection between actors and audience and help achieve a more intimate feel in a large auditorium. The listed building consent also approved to replace the raked stage with a new demountable, modular stage and for the removal of nationally-significant sub stage machinery (identified as historically significant within the list description) but an essential requirement to allow the theatre to meet current staging requirements for large-scale musicals.

The Theatre Royal Drury Lane initially commissioned a Conservation Management Plan to inform the proposed works in the building, consulting widely including the local authority, Historic England, heritage bodies and the Theatres Trust. They also commissioned an Advisory Review which was convened jointly by us and the ABTT.

Citizens Theatre, Glasgow: Category B listed – current alteration and redevelopment scheme

Planning and listed building consent were granted for this scheme in 2016 and work is currently on site.

The works include the demolition of the existing foyer block and south building, and construction of a new building that contains the new foyer, main staircase, bars and the new main entrance facing Gorbals Street. While there was a loss of some historic fabric, these parts of the theatre had been significantly altered and were considered of low historic significance. The benefit to the operation of the theatre by their replacement was therefore considered to outweigh any harm caused.

The works also include the replacement and re-raking of the stalls floor and the installation of a new subfloor ventilation system within the original Victorian auditorium – a more significant intervention. While this was considered a major intervention, the Conservation Management Plan identified it as a positive move as it allowed for existing and intrusive ventilation grills installed in 1978 to be removed, improving the overall appearance of the auditorium. Again the benefit to the operation of the theatre by replacing the floor was considered to outweigh any harm caused.

Royal Shakespeare Theatre: Grade II* listed – transformation project of 2006

Despite the building being Grade II* listed, it was recognised that the building was never satisfactory in theatrical terms and permission was granted to demolish and remodel the auditorium. Although a bold solution, it was one that was required to make the theatre function more successfully. The scheme, however, retained and incorporated the most significant features of the original theatre, including the Art Deco foyers that were restored and repurposed. New build elements were also added to the theatre, including a new entrance, glazed public colonnade and tower with viewing gallery, connecting the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and adjacent Swan Theatre and creating a new public square facing towards the town.

The role of the Theatres Trust

Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres and is a statutory consultee on theatres in the planning system. We provide a free advice service for anyone who wants to make changes to a theatre building or convert a building to theatre use. For more complex cases, we offer an Advisory Review service, convening a panel of experts to provide in-depth advice on your project. We can provide expertise in planning, heritage, listings, architecture and design, amongst other topics and can provide recommendations for appropriate consultants to use on your project.

Contact us at advice@theatrust.org.uk with information about your theatre and how we can help.