

Protecting theatres for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/1703

6 May 2020

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Regeneration & Growth Directorate
The Magistrates
Town Hall Complex
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London
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By e-mail: dmconsultations@walthamforest.gov.uk

Applications: 201007 & 201008

Site: Canon Cinema, 186 Hoe Street, Walthamstow, London, E17 4QH

Proposal: Restoration and alteration to existing Grade II* listed building, comprising: i) works to the Hoe Street frontage including repair of existing fabric and reinstatement of missing original gable feature; ii) erection of three storey side and part-two part-three storey rear extensions, with installation of external cladding; iii) internal alterations to the foyer space and auditorium including repair and reinstatement works, changes to stage and seating profile, creation of new internal openings, entrances and new internal spaces, installation of new light fixtures and the removal of non-original partitions, kiosk, mirrors and the ceiling / cornice in the upper circle.

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

Comment:

Thank you for consulting the Trust regarding this application for planning permission and listed building consent at the former Canon/EMD Cinema in association with the restoration and alteration of this statutory Grade II* listed heritage asset for theatre and performance use.

This is an exciting and significant project which is of great interest to the Trust, not just in terms of the objective of returning the building to theatre use but also for the wider benefits it can bring in revitalising the wider town centre in Walthamstow. This site has been on the Trust's Theatres at Risk list for some time just as it has also been on Historic England's Heritage at Risk register. Historic England have assessed the building's overall condition as "Poor". Given the building's

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Chair Tim Eyles Director Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, David Blyth, Pam Bone, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, David Ian, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Simon Ricketts, Truda Spruyt, Anna Stapleton

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significance as a Grade II* listed heritage asset its restoration and return to positive use is a priority. We have been extensively consulted as a key stakeholder both as part of the pre-application process and throughout the development of this project and are grateful to the Council, design team and future operator for engaging positively.

Although a cinema for a number of years in more recent decades, the building started life as the Granada Theatre in 1930 having been designed by notable cinema and theatre architect Cecil Massey with interiors by Theodore Komisarjevsky. It replaced an earlier theatre on the same site. It was a cine-variety theatre and later a live music venue which hosted several notable and iconic bands and artists throughout the 1950s and 60s including The Beatles, Cilla Black, Johnny Cash, John Coltrane, Buddy Holly, The Rolling Stones, Dusty Springfield and Gene Vincent. It turned to dedicated cinema use in the early 1970s at which time the auditorium was subdivided. Cinema use continued under a number of names due to takeovers and mergers until around 2000 when it was closed by Odeon soon after purchasing its then-operator, ABC. It was dark for a brief period until being taken on by an independent operator, EMD, who operated until 2003. An application for change of use to convert the building for religious use was refused, a decision upheld at Inquiry. A subsequent application was similarly refused. It is understood there was substantial community interest in cinema use being retained, but despite operator interest the freeholder sought unreasonably high rent and the building remained vacant. A further application change of use and Public Inquiry also failed, between 2012 and 2014.

The theatre's former restaurant and tea room which is independently accessed has been in pub use for a substantial period; this is itself a valued facility for local people and is an important venue for the LGBTQ+ community. Since 2015 the foyer has also been in separate pub use with some occasional cinema and performance.

The building's significance meriting its Grade II* listing arises from it being an important example of large and elaborate palaces of entertainment built in more suburban parts of London and from its richly decorated proscenium arch and gilded decorated wall grilles which reflect detailing of the Palace of Cordoba, overlaid with 17th Century Baroque features. It is one of the few buildings of any type in Britain designed in a Moorish style.

We welcome this application for planning permission and listed building consent and are supportive of the project's overall objectives which are consistent with the building's cultural and entertainment purpose and function. Specifically, those objectives are:

- to restore the Granada and reverse its poor condition, which we consider critical given its significance not just as an important building locally within Walthamstow but also on a national level reflecting its listing assessment as being of more than special interest;
- to deliver a large-scale performance venue, which we support on the basis of there being an identified gap in provision to serve the wider London market with viability a determining factor in the Public Inquiry outcomes, Waltham Forest being without a permanent theatre, and an established and reputable operator in place to run the venue;

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- to utilise space within the building to provide new community and educational space to reinforce the Granada's role as a cultural and community asset and optimise use of the building; and
- to deliver new and upgraded commercial space which will further enhance this part of the town centre.

In order to deliver those objectives it is proposed that there will be alterations within the main auditorium to provide a viable level of seating with appropriate audience comfort, alteration to other areas of the building including the foyer and ancillary spaces to provide the front and back of house facilities necessary to deliver community and commercial spaces which support function and viability, and external alterations to help facilitate sufficient back of house and technical provision. We acknowledge that while this will necessitate some degree of loss or harm to historic fabric and features of significance and displace existing users particularly in relation to the Victoria pub, parts of the building have in any case been previously altered and some degree of compromise and harm will be necessary to deliver the wider public benefits arising from the scheme. There is also a need to operate within the context of wider constraints, primarily rear proximity to surrounding residential properties but also the site's wider setting within Hoe Street.

The auditorium is one such area of significant alteration. Much of this area is assessed by the accompanying Heritage Statement as being of 'Very High' significance which is reflective of this area's elaborate décor and Historic England's assessment. Also within this area, currently sitting on the stage, is a Christie organ. It is proposed that both the stage and seating will be altered to better match capacity to what is likely to be viable in this location – around 1,000 seats – and the size for which there is an identified gap in provision within the London market. We consider this to be a reasonable reflection of what could be sustained at this location. To achieve this, the stalls and balcony will be re-raked which will provide enhanced sightlines than are otherwise achievable. The depth of the stalls and balcony will also be reduced which will help provide a more 'intimate' experience and a better relationship to the stage. We are supportive of this aspect because although it marks a departure from original proportions is nonetheless consistent with the overall character and form of the auditorium and would provide an enhanced experience for audiences. Furthermore, original elements will be re-instated and new lighting and audio equipment will be installed which meet modern standards. This area has been impacted by previous sub-division, so overall we consider this part of the proposal to be positive from an operational perspective with a degree of harm from a heritage perspective which is outweighed by the public benefits of a viable configuration and other reinstatement.

However, we have some concerns regarding the location of plant within part of the altered balcony which would result in the loss of a section of ceiling and cornice. It is also a change that once instigated would be immensely difficult and extremely costly to reverse, potentially preventing the full volume of the magnificent auditorium space from being experienced in the future. It is noted that the location of the plant is considered more harmful than the centrally positioned education space which retains the ornate plaster ceiling and builds above the existing rake of the balcony tiers and is seen as more easily reversible. The location of the plant constitutes significant harm to historic fabric which is regrettable and should be fully justified,

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however there seems to be little stated appraisal of possible alternative options which would present a better outcome in terms of preserving heritage. We would welcome further engagement with the team regarding this and recommend the Heritage Statement is further substantiated.

Much of the stage area is similarly of 'Very High' significance, although generally backstage areas are of little or no significance. It is proposed that the stage itself is reconstructed to meet more modern loading capacities and to facilitate the range of shows envisaged, being flat with wing space and a modest fly tower provided within a reconstructed rear of the building. As with the wider auditorium we recognise the constraints of the existing stage which has in any case been previously altered and consider what is proposed will meet modern standards albeit with limited flying facility and enable the type of provision required by Soho Theatre's proposed programme. Therefore although overall the visual impact of this alteration can be considered neutral, as a whole it contributes to the wider public benefits of the scheme. Furthermore an organ pit is being provided; there are two consoles which are of great significance although one is damaged beyond repair due to prolonged water ingress. While currently there is an inability to fully restore the salvageable organ due to budget constraints nonetheless we welcome that future potential is safeguarded. We recommended that a future project and funding be sought to fully restore and reinstate the organ within the theatre.

In terms of backstage operations, we would expect a minimum of four dressing rooms but a suggested level of six-eight for this type of venue to account for the broad range of shows and events envisaged. Plans show five dressing rooms of which one is accessible (with additional accessible shower and accessible WC) with stated places for 25 performers. We note there is additionally a staff changing room which we assume could be utilised if required for larger shows such as an annual pantomime. That the building is fully accessible for wheelchair users is to be welcomed. While this meets the need of the current operator and anticipated programme, it should be acknowledged this would restrict the ability to handle larger touring shows should such a programme be sought in future. As noted above, the backstage area is within an area being altered/rebuilt. Much of it is presently of little or no significance and in a poor condition; it is in close proximity to residential buildings to the rear which presents constraints in terms of design. We consider the rebuild to be sensitive to neighbouring property and of higher quality appearance than is already in place. The new build will also provide enhanced acoustic control and help prevent noise break out to surrounding residences.

Front of house, the foyer and bar areas are also of generally 'Very High' significance in particular the lower and upper foyers and connecting spaces - the flow of space and way that the audience experience the journey between foyer and theatre is recognised as significant. Again there are a number of areas of low or no significance to the front of house including existing WCs. The latter are insufficient for modern requirements; proposed plans show a number of WCs including accessible WCs and substantial cloakroom space. There will be a number of alterations within the foyer such as installation of a draught lobby and new openings to provide DDA compliance although while these will interrupt the original flow and appearance this is mitigated through

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previous alteration. It is also acknowledged that these are critical provisions for a theatre, that there is scant alternative location for such provisions and that the operational requirement in this instance outweighs the loss. Otherwise, generally these areas will be largely restored with original features reinstated which is to be welcomed. The Ziggurat bar will provide substantial front of house space for audiences and it is stated within application documents there is sufficient acoustic separation from the foyer bar which we understand to be open to the wider public. This could be a beneficial source of ancillary income to support the venue's overall viability and help bring people into the building. Further to the foyer bar, a bar/restaurant is also proposed to the first floor which will have similar benefits.

To the second floor will be a range of community and educational spaces which will help reinforce the Granada's role as a community asset, which again we support. We note there is substantial space available within the ceiling void and we suggest there might be an opportunity to utilise this space for further benefit to the venue's sustainability and function; potentially this could serve as a rehearsal space or other secondary performance/function space. It is recommended that the project be engineered to accommodate such provision in the future. There are also independent commercial units to be provided; we would suggest there might be an opportunity to utilise one of these to re-provide the current Victoria pub on the basis that it is a well-regarded social and cultural facility for the LGBTQ+ community which could complement the overall community and cultural function of the Granada.

We have no objections to the overall approach to internal decoration; while it does not fully reinstate the décor of Komisarjevsky's original scheme a future reinstatement is not prohibited and we consider the current proposal a pragmatic solution in the context of budget available and preventing further decline to this asset that would come from continued vacancy.

On balance we are highly supportive of this proposal, notwithstanding some areas of concern and suggestions outlined. We also consider it to be in accordance with local and national policy. The proposal contributes to Strategic Objective 14 of the Core Strategy 2012 because it will help safeguard and strengthen the function of the designated Walthamstow Town Centre; supporting paragraph 17.4 acknowledges the borough has a relatively poor range of cultural and entertainment facilities with opportunities to address this supported. This is reflected by Policy CS11.b which encourages new leisure developments in Walthamstow town centre and Policy DM27 of the Development Management Policies (2013) encourages appropriate evening and night time uses that contribute to the vitality of the borough's designated town centres. Paragraph 92 of the NPPF (2019) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for community facilities which includes cultural buildings such as this, especially given the described social and community offer as part of this development.

In terms of heritage, Policy CS12 of the Core Strategy (2012) promotes the conservation and enhancement of the borough's heritage assets which includes seeking beneficial uses and improvements to historic buildings (part C) and ensuring improved access to historic assets both of which are achieved by this project. Part J. of Development Management Policy DM28 also

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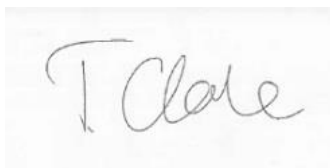
supports proposals which facilitate the successful rehabilitation of “Heritage Assets at Risk” with viable uses consistent with their heritage, a principle with which this proposal can be considered to accord.

Although there is some degree of harm and alteration, it can be considered that overall there is appropriate justification because of the condition of the building (and its status on the ‘at risk’ lists of both the Trust and Historic England) and that it will be brought back into a viable use consistent with its conservation and will positively contribute to the economic vitality of the designated town centre and in turn sustainable communities as well as making a contribution to local character and distinctiveness in line with NPPF paragraph 192. The tests of paragraph 193 can be considered to be met because it requires great weight to be placed on the conservation of the Granada which would be achieved through returning it to active use and, moving to paragraph 196, it can be demonstrated that there are sufficient public benefits including securing the optimum viable use to justify less than substantial harm. However, as stated we currently have concern regarding the location of the plant so for full compliance with these policies further justification and analysis should be provided

In conclusion we consider this proposal to represent a sensitive restoration of a significant cultural and heritage asset which will bring great benefit to Walthamstow, local people within the wider borough, and meet a wider London market need for a 1,000 seat venue. Subject to areas of further consideration set out which could be managed by condition or further submission of information prior to determination **we recommend the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.**

There are further discussions taking place between the Trust and the design team and Historic England and we understand some documents are being revised and will be re-submitted, so we may further amend our comments and make recommendations on conditions we may seek accordingly.

Otherwise please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments further.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
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