

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/2306

22 July 2020

Adam Thomson
Planning & Strategy
City Development
The City of Edinburgh Council
Business Centre G2
Waverley Court
4 East Market Street
Edinburgh
EH8 8BG

By e-mail: planning@edinburgh.gov.uk

Application: 20/02249/FUL & 20/02245/LBC

Site: 2 Leven Street Edinburgh EH3 9LQ

Proposal: Alterations, refurbishments and extensions to improve accessibility, public space and performance facilities.

Remit:

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1978 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in Scotland through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (Scotland) Regulation 2013, 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 King's Theatre Edinburgh, which seeks significant alterations within the theatre to improve its facilities and accessibility and help it meet the needs of modern shows to help sustain it into the future, along with some external alterations including extension. The applicant engaged the Trust at an early stage in the formulation of this project which included facilitation of a detailed 'Advisory Review'. We have also met with the theatre and their team following submission of these applications to better understand amendments following our earlier advice.

King's Theatre is one of Scotland's oldest theatres and one of the most complete and important surviving Edwardian theatres in the UK having continuously operated since opening in 1906. Its Category A listing reflects this significance; there are very few purpose-built theatres across the

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Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

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UK designated to this most significant level (equivalent Grade A in Northern Ireland and Grade I in England and Wales).

Although there have been some adaptations and alterations – particularly in 1955 and 1985 – the quantum of original surviving fabric illustrates why it is so significant. It is also the last surviving design of J.D. Swanston and build of William Stewart Cruikshank. The exterior consists of Dumfries red ashlar sandstone with an auditorium of exceptional significance described by the Trust's database entry as '*a space of operatic magnificence, a glorious extravaganza of lush Viennese Baroque*'. King's hosts prestigious touring shows and also plays an important role as an Edinburgh International Festival host venue. It is therefore a key cultural and heritage asset not just for Edinburgh but Scotland as a whole, serving the wider community and attracting visitors into the city.

The rationale and need for these works was clearly articulated to us within our pre-application engagement and is this reflected within the applicant's supporting documents. Overall this project seeks to improve accessibility into and through the building, for example creating level access from the street into the auditorium, opening front of house spaces and providing accessible dressing rooms and access backstage. It will improve and expand the theatre's overall facilities which will help make it more of an all-day destination; this will help enhance the theatre's sustainability and viability and improve its role as a community and cultural asset. It will modernise the theatre's technical capabilities which will help it meet the needs of productions and ensure it remains a venue capable of accepting high-profile shows. It will also help improve safety and the working environment for performers and staff. In principle these are measures are welcomed by the Trust and can be supported, notwithstanding individual heritage implications. Fundamentally it is important that King's Theatre is able to develop in order to meet the needs of its users and maintain its role and function in future.

The project's objectives are to be achieved through a number of interventions.

Front of house

At basement level walls and floor will be removed to provide an expanded Pit Bar utilising the bar counter from the Tudor Bar, which itself is to become the Front of House office. Although the Tudor Bar is of great significance overall we consider this to be acceptable as the room was too small to meet the theatre's interval needs and was also under-used due to its location making it difficult for audience members to find. It is understood that the main decorative features of the Tudor bar are to be retained in the change to office use. The change of use of room and the relocation of the bar counter are considered reversible. The creation of the new Pit Bar will in turn result in several auditorium door sets with heritage value being relocated but this does not appear to give rise to any significant concerns, however, it is recommended that a condition is placed on those with no new suggested location to ensure that they are retained and reused within the building. The existing WCs at this level will be altered and while overall space is limited and there are concerns about congestion around the entrance / sink areas it is positive the overall number will be increased.

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At ground floor level there is to be an extension to the south/west elevation enabling better accessibility for wheelchair users and others with decreased mobility which we support. The floor will also be altered across a wider area including the box office to enable level access to a broader area of the front of house space and the auditorium; this area will be opened up further than is currently the case. We recognise the rationale for this but it is regrettable the foyer kiosks will be lost as these are features of significance which contribute to the character of King's. As per the advice of Historic Environment Scotland we recommend these are re-located elsewhere within the building if possible; we have received some reassurance this is being positively considered. Associated with this will be ensuring an appropriate approach to flooring, as currently the floor pattern reflects the placing of the kiosks. The decorative doors next to the kiosks are to be relocated to the front which we support. The lobbies outside of the two public lifts appear tight and could be blocked if a wheelchair user is waiting for a lift but otherwise proposals at this level seem to meet the overall project objective. The accessible WC off of the main foyer appears narrow and perhaps not in the optimum location although following discussion with the applicant we appreciate the rationale for this, not least that it allows the café to be used without needing to use other parts of the building. Doors between the main entrance lobby and café and box office are to be on hold open devices or similar to allow increased connectivity between spaces and encourage public flow between them. This will be particularly important for the café space which is to serve as a rear stalls bar at intervals. The existing mezzanine level to the north-west which is currently used as an office will be removed. This will allow the new box office a more handsome proportion and match that of the café.

To the first floor there would be some minor alteration to the Dress Circle Bar as well as alterations to circulation and WCs, however the alterations to the foyer appear to be in line with the theatre's original form. We welcome that the character of the Dress Circle bar is to be retained. The new opening between the bar and the Howard and Wyndham room will sensitively allow for additional and needed bar space. We look forward to seeing how the new opening is to be detailed as the design progresses.

There are more extensive alterations proposed to the second floor (Upper Circle bar and foyer) and it is pleasing to see a number of WCs added. The Upper Circle bar has a character marked by 1960's interventions. While we agree with the approach to maintain the markedly different character of the space, the proposed new ceiling appears to have an awkward junction with the panelling and the single flat plane slightly overbearing on the space. This may be to do with the angle of the 3d view.

The new a more sensitively located control room together with caption and audio description room at third floor level is welcomed, as is the ability to make the fourth floor follow spot position fully accessible via use of the new public lift.

Auditorium

The major alteration to the auditorium is the removal of the 1950's extension to the Upper Circle

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which also saw the removal of the top (third) tier of the auditorium. This allows reinstatement of the rear wall of the auditorium back to its original position at these upper levels. This is seen as a positive change and will reverse some of the harm to the building from 50's alteration. While it is not practical at this time to reinstate the lost top balcony, the proposed works do start to return the auditorium to its original proportion. The proposed changes are at the loss of seats, however these were distanced from the stage and with poor connectivity between these and the actors on stage. It is noted that the new rear wall is proposed as faceted which may be led by the windows to the control room and looking to replicate the gentle facet of the historic timber panelled screens to the rear of the Dress Circle. The treatment of the face of this wall will no doubt be subject to further review at later design stages and we would like to be informed of these later iterations to understand how the finish impacts on the overall character of the auditorium.

This new rear wall and further new wall enclosures to the rear of the Dress Circle and at stalls level provide lobbied enclosures to the new escape stairs and lifts. Whilst it is regrettable that the lobbies encroach on the rear of the auditorium, it is understood that this is necessary for fire safety purposes and appreciate that, particularly when dealing with tight sites such as at the King's, some compromises will need to be made in order to meet current regulatory standards. We note in particular HES' concerns regarding the treatment of the enclosure to the rear of the Dress Circle and likewise request that further consideration is given to this to ensure that this does not detract from the historic character of the auditorium.

Stage house

The stage is to have its rake removed to be replaced with a new flat floor. Similar work has also been undertaken recently at the Dominion, one of the largest theatres in London's West End. This is necessary to enable the theatre to handle the sets and requirements of modern shows, for which a rake can be prohibitive. Although the loss of original fabric is regrettable, without such alteration the range of shows King's could attract would become more constrained over time which ultimately would result in its role and viability diminishing. There is no under-stage machinery shown on the plans and it is believed that little survives. We would strongly encourage the recording and preservation of any equipment that does remain and this could be secured by way of condition.

When replacing a raked stage with a flat floor the level of the stage and sightline from the auditorium require careful consideration. We understand from earlier conversations with the design team that this has been taken into consideration and that the sightlines will not be adversely negatively impacted.

Alongside replacement of the stage will be structural alterations to enable level access to back of house areas which we support.

At fourth floor level there are significant areas of alteration shown on plans within the fly tower and grid above, most significantly including removal of the fly tower roof to increase its height. Again, this is necessary to provide a safe working grid, help improve loading capacity associated

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with the needs of modern shows and to allow increased flying height to take the sets associated with these shows.

Associated with the new grid is the relocation of the drum and shaft, historic stage equipment of significance. It is understood that the intention is to relocate this to the new grid position and to bring it back into use. While it may not possible to for tours of the building to view the equipment in action first hand due to access difficulties, the design team's current ambition to relay footage of the drum and shaft working to a screen within the heritage space is welcomed as this would enable members of the public to understand more about the workings of historical theatres.

The stage house also contains an original paint frame, again an item of historic significance. This is part of a double paint frame. The remaining existing frame is to be relocated to the original rear wall position, utilising the original guides. This will allow the paint floor to be reduced in width freeing up valuable space (depth) within the stage house for production use whilst still allowing the paint frame to be seen in its original context.

Back of house

There will be extensive alterations to back of house spaces at basement level. As cited above, at stage level there will be alterations providing level access for performers which we welcome.

At ground floor there are a variety of corridors and staircases which makes the overall layout seem complex but we acknowledge this is a result of the challenge of various level changes in the building and the need to provide means of escape. The 'Star Dressing Room' has been located at this level although we suggest there is an opportunity to consider space on the floor above for this purpose which appears as though it may provide a better environment for such purpose. Alongside it is a small stage door but again we appreciate there are constraints which limit alternative opportunities.

External

There are also a number of alterations proposed which will slightly extend the theatre – both a small café extension to the south and the increase in height of the fly tower. We are supportive of these, which are necessary to deliver the project's objectives, and we do not consider them to cause harm to the theatre's appearance and character. We have no objection to the insertion of the long-slot window to the north elevation. At present the proposed windows either side of the main entrance do not match and suggest this should be reviewed. The new modern canopy that is proposed is more lightweight in appearance than the current canopy and allows the front elevation – in particularly the central part – to be read more easily as a whole. The theatre will also benefit from enhanced signage which will help improve its visibility and prominence.

In conclusion we welcome this project and the investment into the theatre which will help ensure it remains sustainable and viable into the future. Furthermore, we welcome that it will significantly improve accessibility into and through the building, not just for audiences but also for performers and staff. Although a number of alterations are proposed within this heritage asset of

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great national significance, broadly we support these proposals which can be considered necessary to allow the theatre to meet the needs of its audiences and continue to receive the stature and standard of shows for which it is accustomed. As noted in our comments above there are some areas that require further detail or amendment – in particular the foyer kiosks and new wall/enclosure to the rear of the auditorium – but this could be managed by condition. Overall we recommend the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss this representation in greater detail.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke".

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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