

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1813

03 September 2020

Mr I Berry
Planning & Building Control
Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council,
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By e-mail: ian.berry@tameside.gov.uk

Application: 20/00479/LBC

Site: Theatre Royal, Corporation Street, Hyde, Tameside, SK14 1AB

Proposal: Proposed refurbishment works externally to front (Onward Street) and side (Henry Street) elevations. Part removal of stage with new replacement stage at reduced height providing level access throughout. Proposed alterations to first floor to allow for female members. Proposed repair and retention of existing ceiling plus required internal alterations to accommodate use.

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:

This application for Listed Building Consent at Theatre Royal Hyde has come to the attention of the Trust. We were not notified or consulted, neither were we consulted on a similar previous application (18/00954/LBC) which was refused in 2019 despite us having submitted a detailed objection to a further previous application (18/00490/LBC) in July 2018. Although we had originally raised concerns to the building's change of use to a religious/cultural centre, we acknowledged there were some benefits arising from the building being in use.

Theatre Royal is a statutory Grade II listed cultural and heritage asset. It is an Edwardian theatre which opened in 1902, with a decorative terracotta façade and intimate and richly decorated auditorium. Its capacity was 1,400, split across pit stalls, gallery, dress circle and rear circle. It

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had one of the largest stages in the area, and from 1914 had a movable screen added to enable some cinema use. Theatre ceased in the early 1970s after which it became a cinema from 1972. The auditorium formed one screen with the stage area turned into a second smaller screen. Although the applicant's Heritage Statement claims the cinema to have closed in 1985, we understand this to have been later in mid-1993 following fraud. It has been vacant since, with the current occupant having taken on the building on in 2016 although we understand it is not yet being utilised. It was saved from demolition in 1999 with statutory listing being granted in 2000. It is on the Trust's Theatres at Risk register due to the significance and condition of the building with fears it could further deteriorate with it being largely unoccupied. Nonetheless we consider Theatre Royal to be functionally sound and intact and could be viable as a community theatre and cinema with a much larger auditorium than the neighbouring Hyde Festival Theatre.

As a priority building for the Trust we have maintained a watching brief on Theatre Royal. We are keen to ensure that any plans and alterations respect its significance, maintain the opportunity to revert to performance use in future and provide access to the building for the wider community in Hyde.

This proposal seeks to undertake a number of works and alterations to facilitate use as a cultural centre. Primarily this includes removing the remaining stage to allow for level access throughout the ground floor; a new full height internal glass wall to form separation to the main hall; creation of an accessible WC, male WCs, male ablution area, shower room, kitchen and brew room to the ground floor; removal of seating within the first floor Gallery with alterations to floor levels to create a level area for female users; insertion of glass walls with reflective film to the perimeter of the Gallery; creating of female WCs, ablution area, shower room, kitchen, security room, staff WCs, store, office and meeting room to the first floor; and repairs and refurbishments to the main ceiling.

As with previous applications and comments, we have significant concerns and objections to these works. We would also note that there is information missing from the application, most fundamentally that there is no proposed basement and ground floor plan available and no existing basement plan. We request that these are made available.

Stage

We understand around half of the stage has already been removed, it is to be assumed some of this occurred as part of works permitted in 2008 which flattened the auditorium floor as the ventilation pipes to the sub-floor space referenced in the Design & Access Statement seem to be shown in a more recent photo within the auditorium we have on record. However this work does not seem to have been included within the relevant listed building consent; the Trust at the time sought refusal due to lack of information and it also appears there was subsequent engagement between the Trust and the Council's Conservation Officer. Neither is it clear whether the area of stage removed does constitute half its area; images within the Heritage Statement from 2018 show further areas of removal but it is unknown when this occurred.

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The applicant argues the remaining incomplete stage is therefore reduced in significance which we would dispute in the strongest terms; removal of the stage can be considered to detract from the building's character, significance and identification as a theatre building and constitute substantial harm. Although the Heritage Statement suggests the effect of the stage has been lost by previous levelling of the auditorium floor, with which we would disagree, they subsequently acknowledge the work is not reversible yet the level floor could be removed and original raked floor exposed thus returning the auditorium close to its original form.

We welcome that the curtain, props and equipment will remain but if the entirety of the stage is removed it is not clear whether this will have any impact on their preservation, or how the remaining proscenium will be protected. However, we would need to see the proposed ground floor plan and images to sufficiently understand proposals. Paragraph 15 of Planning Practice Guidance on the Historic Environment states harmful development may sometimes be justified in the interests of realising the optimum viable use of an asset. While in principle a place of worship is a compatible use for Theatre Royal it is not clear it represents the optimum viable use. As such although we acknowledge the applicant's rationale for seeking a larger flat-floor area to facilitate large congregation particular cultural requirements should not be used as a justification for loss of fabric and significance. Given there may be other viable uses for Theatre Royal neither is it clear the proposal would result in sufficient public benefit or be outweighed by the benefit of bringing the building back into use as described in paragraph 195 of the NPPF (2019). Policy C5 of the Tameside Unitary Development Plan (2004) seeks continuation of the use for which the building was designed as most desirable, and states new uses should not adversely affect the essential character of the building. Therefore this part of the proposal is contrary to local and national policy. Furthermore, this element of the proposal appears unchanged from the previous application and was cited by the Council as a primary reason for refusal.

Auditorium

Again, the lack of proposed ground floor plans compromises proper and appropriate assessment of these works. This is especially pertinent in the case of the new male WCs, ablution area, shower, kitchen and brew room. The Heritage Statement justifies these additions largely on the basis they are needed, but fails to give details as to whether any historic fabric will be lost through installing and servicing these areas or whether they detract from the significance of the building. There is a risk that insertion of these functions could impact future reversibility. There is similar lack of detail for equivalent areas to the first floor, although a proposed plan is available for that level. The female WCs and ablution areas replace what appears to be a bar, potentially this may be an area of significance so should be described further. The kitchen and female showers would appear to be less problematic because they seem to replace existing WCs but again this should be confirmed. The main office and meeting rooms also appear to replace back-of-house spaces of similar nature.

We strongly object to the covering of the decorative proscenium, ceiling and other features. Again, as with our comments in relation to the stage set out above, we understand the conflict

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between the Muslim faith and imagery but this in itself should not be a basis for masking the fabric and decorative significance of the theatre as a designated heritage asset. It is likely that plasterboard coverings would further detract from the auditorium's significance, and could potentially compromise the details it is covering due to temperature differences between the masked area and the rest of the auditorium giving rise to damp and condensation. Plans also show columns within the first floor balcony level to be boxed in; it is stated this is due to asbestos but potentially these are also decorative features which could deteriorate. Proposed Section B-B shows an area of replacement wall plaster above the proscenium. It must be ensured this is a like-for-like replacement. We are however appreciative of efforts to repair damaged areas of plaster, although as owner of the building the applicant has a responsibility to appropriately maintain and inspect the suspended plaster ceiling regularly in line with the Association of British Theatre Technicians Guidance for fibrous plaster ceilings. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has stated that this inspection regime should be applied to any building with a suspended fibrous plaster ceiling, as good practice.

To the first floor Gallery a full height internal glass wall is proposed to provide separation from the main auditorium and prevent male worshippers seeing into the female area. In principle we do not object to the installation of the glazed screen in itself on the basis of it being fixed in such a way that does not harm historic fabric or compromise reversal as described in the Heritage Statement. However, although in this version of the application the previous false ceiling has been omitted when combined with other interventions referenced both previously and subsequently within these comments there would still be a cumulative impact constituting substantial harm to the character of the auditorium.

We have significant concerns about the insertion of an insulated barrier to the second floor. Its stated purpose is to reduce the cost of heating the building, but neglecting parts of the building could compromise historic fabric through moisture and damp. While it would better protect the volume of space in the auditorium compared to the previous scheme, it would still hide historic features and detract from the auditorium's true volume.

External works

It appears from the Heritage Statement and proposed elevation drawings that external works are to consist of repair and replacement which we support, although this should be on a like-for-like basis.

Conclusion & summary

With basement and ground floor plans missing from this application, and there being a lack of detail as to the impact of some potentially significant alterations, we are unable to give a more definitive assessment of various aspects of this proposal. We recommend that missing information is provided as soon as possible.

Nonetheless, there are parts of these proposals to which we strongly object to the extent that submission of the missing information would not alter our overall recommendation to refuse listed

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building consent for these works. Although there have been some amendments compared to the previous refused application in 2018/19, fundamentally we do not consider the main reasons for refusal have been addressed. The removal of the stage, shielding of decorative features and cumulative alteration within the auditorium would result in substantial harm to the significance of Theatre Royal as a designated heritage asset. We do not consider there is sufficient public benefit to override conflict with local or national policy and guidance.

As a Theatre at Risk, Theatre Royal is a priority case for the Trust. We would welcome engagement with the applicant and the Council to find a positive way forward for this significant asset for Hyde.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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