

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/2872

01 September 2020

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Communities and Place
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By e-mail: developmentcontrol@derby.gov.uk

Application: 20/00899/CAD

Site: Assembly Rooms Market Place Derby DE1 3AH

Proposal: Demolition of the Assembly Rooms and adjacent multi-storey car park.

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 Theatres Trust regarding this application for demolition in a conservation area. We have been contacted because the site to be demolished includes the Assembly Rooms.

The Assembly Rooms has served as Derby's largest theatre and venue over the last few decades, following the closure of the Grand Theatre in 1950 and the Hippodrome in 1959. It is on the site of the previous Assembly Rooms which was demolished in 1971 following a fire. The current Assembly Rooms opened in 1977 and contained a main flexible auditorium for both standing or seating and a capacity of around 1,200 and a smaller flexible venue called the Darwin. The Darwin had its own foyer and bar which featured an original Jacobean ceiling salvaged from a house which previously sat on the site. The main Assembly Rooms foyer was sizeable and it had two bars and a coffee bar. However the venue had some limitations which restricted the shows it could receive, primarily that it lacked a fly tower. The Assembly Rooms

Theatres Trust

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Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

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

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

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have been closed since 2014 following a fire which damaged the plant room, also impacting the adjoining car park.

Since that time Derby has been without provision for large-scale theatre and performance, other than the relatively limited range of events which can be feasibly hosted at the much larger Derby Arena. This has been further compounded by the indefinite closure of the Guildhall. The lack of theatre and cultural provision within Derby means spend leaving the local community due to audiences travelling to venues in other areas as well as the city missing out on inbound spend and footfall. In turn this will be undermining the attractiveness and viability of Derby as a centre; it is widely recognised that as retail and town centres come under increasing pressure cultural facilities have an important role to play in arresting decline. They also contribute to the social and cultural wellbeing of local people.

The Trust accepts that the viability of retaining the existing Assembly Rooms is a challenge in light of the costs and financial risk associated with repair and refurbishment, particularly because as outlined within the Economic Viability Report accompanying the application the venue has technical constraints. This is also acknowledged by the Trust and partially described above in our overview of the Assembly Rooms. However, in the absence of commitment to and permission for a suitable replacement venue with a realistic delivery plan we are currently unable to support the application for demolition of the Assembly Rooms.

It is notable the Economic Viability Report considers only 'continuation with refurbishment', 'do nothing' or 'demolish the building'. Option 1 (continuation with refurbishment) notes assessment of a "new state-of-the-art building" being in the region of £45 million which a figure repeated elsewhere within the document. Such a project is not further considered or substantiated; we consider there needs to be a realistic fourth option for demolition and replacement. The Planning Statement discusses the potential new venue as part of the Becketwell scheme but this is at an early stage of planning and with a capacity of 3,500 and also catering to conferences and other events will not necessarily address Derby's gap in provision due to its size and nature. We would note there is no reference or assessment as to whether there is a role for the Grade II listed Hippodrome as part of a strategy for theatre and cultural provision in Derby.

We would strongly encourage the Council to commit to replacement of the Assembly Halls and for such a scheme to have full planning permission before demolition of the Assembly Rooms is undertaken. We would also encourage such plans to be finalised as soon as is practical given the continuing lack of provision in Derby. Alternatively another solution might be to provide interim provision while a permanent scheme is taken forward, potentially on the Assembly Rooms site. The Troubadour theatres in Wembley and White City in London provide a model for this, along with the 'Mercury at Abbey Field' in Colchester which ran its pantomime and a small number of touring shows and comedians from an 800-seat heated marquee during construction works.

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Policy CP14 of the Derby City Local Plan Part 1: Core Strategy (2017) commits the Council to elevating Derby's identity and reputation as a cultural and leisure destination, increasing visitor numbers and increasing participation in cultural and leisure activities. Demolition of the Assembly Rooms without replacement provision would conflict with this objective. Furthermore paragraph 92 of the NPPF (2019) seeks decisions to plan positively for community facilities including cultural buildings. There is therefore a policy basis for securing re-provision.

In conclusion although we are broadly accepting of the need to demolish the Assembly Rooms we cannot support this application unless larger-scale theatre provision in Derby is safeguarded. If permission is granted, we would encourage the Jacobean ceiling within the Darwin foyer to be retained for future re-use or recorded. We also recommend that any equipment is salvaged and made available to other theatres, especially those which are community or volunteer-run.

Please contact us should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail. We otherwise encourage continued engagement between the Council and the Trust on theatre provision in Derby.

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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