

Ref.: TC

10 December 2020

Michael Glasgow
Planning division
Development management (5th floor - hub 2)
PO Box 64529
LONDON
SE1P 5LX

By e-mail: planningstatconsultees@southwark.gov.uk

Application: 20/AP/3013

Site: Colechurch House London Bridge Walk London Southwark

Proposal: Redevelopment of the site to include demolition of Colechurch House, pedestrian footbridge and walkway and erection of an elevated 22-storey building (+ 4-storey basement) above a public park and providing office floorspace, retail floorspace, restaurant/café floorspace, leisure floorspace (all Use Class E), theatre and a bar (Sui Generis), delivered alongside public realm improvements, roof gardens, cycle parking, servicing, refuse, plant areas and other associated works incidental to the development. The application is accompanied by an Environmental Statement (ES) in accordance with the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (as amended).

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 has come to the attention of the Trust because it includes provision of a theatre with ancillary restaurant which will serve as a new home for Southwark Playhouse. Our comments focus on the theatre element and do not provide an opinion of the overall design, scale or mix of uses of the wider development.

Southwark Playhouse was founded in 1993 and has now become one of London's most important community and fringe theatres, with an extensive educational and youth training programme and a focus on showcasing new works and artists. Since 2013 the theatre has been in a temporary home due to its original site being impacted by London Bridge development and it

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

T 020 7836 8591 **E** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **W** theatrestrust.org.uk

Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, David Blyth, Pam Bone, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Simon Ricketts, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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has not returned as anticipated due to apparent shortcomings in the relevant Section 106 agreement which does not sustainably secure theatre provision.

We welcome inclusion of a theatre within this development, which is set within the basement levels. Whilst we are supportive of Southwark Playhouse and provision of theatre at this site, we wish to set out some advice which we consider will optimise the theatre's design and function which in turn will ensure this facility will be sustainable and viable into the future.

The theatre does benefit from a fairly good level of street frontage, although the main foyer and bar area is half a level below, down a flight of stairs/lift. Although Southwark Playhouse is already well known and regarded it will be important to ensure ongoing sustainability and reaching of new audiences by allowing it to promote itself to passing pedestrians and vehicles through this street frontage. We would also recommend that thought is given to wayfinding from the station to the theatre, particularly if approached from the new landscaped area associated with the building and that thought be given to a 'gallows' type sign or similar that can project into the street to provide visibility and signposting when approaching from either end of Tooley Street.

The proposal also provides an ancillary bar/restaurant which has been lacking within some other basement theatre proposals. This will provide the theatre with an important additional revenue stream to help sustain its wider community and cultural programme and value, also enabling the unit to be open and active even when the performance spaces themselves are not in use. It is understood that there is some discussion as to whether the restaurant unit is a shared space. Theatres Trust would strongly oppose this proposal. This is the only bar space available within the new theatre which has an overall capacity of 400 across its 2 auditoria. Therefore it is vital that the restaurant space is considered as an integral part of the theatre rather than as a separate unit. While it may be the ambition of Southwark Playhouse to provide a food offer to widen the daytime appeal of the foyer bar space, it is important to understand what this offer may be due to the size restrictions of the area marked as 'kitchen' and the possible limits on extract ventilation bearing in mind the landscaped area above.

We understand the theatre will be provided as a shell as part of the base build and fitted out through Section 106 agreement. What the plans do not show the presence of is acoustic separation such as thickened/reinforced base slabs which may be need to be fitted within the base build to prevent issues associated with acoustic transfer into and from units above. This will also help to future-proof the theatre and the wider development should commercial uses change to residential or short-stay uses. The base build plans will also need to take into account the necessity of box-in box, or similar, acoustic build up to provide adequate acoustic separation for the auditoria, to reduce both air borne and vibrational acoustic transfer. Acoustic build-ups such as this are space hungry. It is therefore vital that this provision is understood at this early stage in design to ensure that the volume of space provided by the base build is adequate. We strongly recommend that the applicant seek specialist technical advice with regard acoustics to ensure that the proposals deliver the requirements for a theatre.

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The above will be particularly relevant in the smaller auditorium which has a single storey floor to ceiling height (a rehearsal space is provided directly above). Acoustic requirements will need to be carefully co-ordinated with ventilation ductwork and lighting grids. Early co-ordination of these elements would be extremely beneficial to avoid any problems at a later stage.

The balcony level within the larger auditorium is not accessible to wheelchair users. We would expect new build theatres to provide part M compliance throughout and modifications should be sought to rectify this.

With regard other Part M provision the theatre will need to provide Changing Places toilet which needs to be incorporated into the current plans. This and the location of other WC and shower provision need to be determined early so that the drainage requirements can be co-ordinated with the base build design. Likewise for any drainage provision associated with bars etc.

Regarding WC provision, this should align with the ABTT Technical Standards for Places of Entertainment / BS 6465. There appears to be an under provision of female WC's at present. Ambulant disabled cubicles should also be included.

There does not appear to be any separation between front and back of house and although this may be intentional for flexibility it could give rise to security and safety implications. This could be easily addressed by insertion of additional doors or controls to be placed on doors already anticipated.

We have concern about the area annotated as a crush bar which does not provide adequate space for either bar queuing or dwell space at the lower levels and could have implications on movement via the stairs and lift. Neither is any drainage indicated in this area which further limits the functionality of the space. As already stated, bar sales provide a vital source of income for theatres and it is crucial that the theatre has adequate provision for this (see also point above regarding the foyer bar/restaurant space). If the foyer bar is to be the main bar space for the theatre, it will be important for the operator to consider the movement of audiences between auditoria and bar pre and post show, during the interval (which may need to be longer as a result) and, in particular, at show cross-over time.

That there are two passenger lifts to the theatre is welcomed, again lack of provision has been an issue in other recent basement theatre proposals in London. These are annotated as passenger lifts only and that there does not appear to be a provision of a dedicated fire lift for the basement theatre. Indeed the emergency evacuation from basement levels is not detailed in the fire strategy provided in the planning documentation. We note with concern the general comment in the fire strategy that Evac Chairs will be required. This is not an acceptable form of evacuation from a 4-storey basement theatre and we would insist that an evacuation lift that can be used as a means of escape for those unable to use stairs be provided. In addition there are only 2 protected stairwells are provided to serve the theatre and other units (office, retail unit and gym) in this 4 storey-deep basement area. The travel distance between auditorium and protected

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corridors and stairs is also queried. We therefore seek assurance that the base build provides for the safe evacuation for the numbers of audience members, performers and staff as expected by Southwark Playhouse, assuming the worst case scenario of both auditoria in full use and possible use of the rehearsal space and taking into account the concurrent evacuation of the other fully occupied basement units utilising the same stair and lift cores. Any necessary limit on theatre occupation and capacity must be clear and transparent and fully agreed with the theatre as this could affect its viability.

The get-in lift and corridor width appears adequate but the journey from street to the venue is currently convoluted with a number of turns. Whilst this is manageable, especially for the smaller nature of sets and equipment likely to be used at Southwark Playhouse, it would be beneficial to explore if a simpler route is achievable. The journey between get-in lift and auditoria passes through public routes and therefore it will be important that the fit out provide durable wall and floor surfacing in these areas over and above a standard front of house area finish.

Overall, this venue has the potential to be a highly successful venue run by a reputable and well respected operator. Southwark Playhouse has much experience and involvement in theatre build projects and is an experienced client. However, theatres are complex buildings and even more so when integrated into a multi-use site as at Colechurch House. In order to optimise the theatre's potential for success and taking into account the additional implications associated with a basement venue such as ventilation and escape, we recommend that the applicant appoint a specialised theatre consultant advice both on the design and co-ordination with the base build. Their expertise would also be beneficial in determining the scoping of and specification of works for the fit out for example best materials, fixtures and fittings for the theatre which we understand is to be part of a Section 106 agreement. The Trust can provide details of such consultants if required.

It will be important that the Section 106 agreement and any other conditions and obligations are appropriately worded and sufficiently robust. To that end we would encourage the Council, the applicant and Southwark Playhouse to engage with the Trust as we have experience of similar developments. Within that it is essential the street-level bar/restaurant is treated as an integral part of the theatre rather than as a separate commercial enterprise with a commercial rent.

In conclusion we welcome inclusion of this theatre space within the proposed development and are keen to see that it is delivered. Please ensure the Trust is engaged as this application is taken forward, particularly in the event of subsequent amendment to plans.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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