

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/2576

01 June 2021

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**Application:** 21/00728/FUL & 21/00729/LBC

**Site:** JD Wetherspoons PLC Old State Cinema George Street Grays Essex RM17 6LZ

**Proposal:** Change of use of building from cinema to public house and associated internal and external works to facilitate use, including the creation of external beer garden on frontage to George Street full repair of external envelope as found necessary following dilapidation's survey; &

Works to create public house and ancillary areas within existing building, including full internal refurbishment and redecoration scheme and external works including creation of beer garden.

## **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 Theatres Trust regarding these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at the Grade II\* listed State. It is proposed that the building is restored and converted into a public house along with associated alterations and refurbishments. Similar plans were permitted in 2018 which the Trust broadly supported with some conditions.

The State opened in 1938 and was built in Art Deco style by FGM Chancellor. It had a capacity of around 2,200. It is considered as one of the most completely preserved and theatrical of the late 1930s cinemas. It is equipped with a stage and dressing rooms which enabled occasional live shows, and some concerts were also held after the building became a nightclub in the 1990s. During the 1980s a series of organ concerts were held and these were revived during the nightclub years in the 1990s. It has also been used for filming on a number of occasions

### **Theatres Trust**

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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**Chair** Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

**Trustees** Richard Baldwin, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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including notably the music video for Jamiroquai's Deeper Underground and the film Who Framed Roger Rabbit?. As a cinema it closed in 1989 and has been vacant since the nightclub closed in 1998. The State was originally listed Grade II in 1985 but was regraded to Grade II\* in June 2000 following a re-appraisal of the original interior features which were still intact. It is understood to be one of only eight 'super cinemas' in England to be listed II\* and is of great significance.

The State has suffered deterioration particularly as a result of water ingress and clearly further prolonged vacancy will exacerbate and increase damage and loss. It is on Historic England's Heritage at Risk register and Cinema Theatre Association's Cinemas at Risk list. It is a distinctive and significant contributor to local townscape and character in Grays. Therefore its sensitive restoration and return to active use must be a priority.

On that basis we are supportive of the proposed change of use. Given the State's size it is unlikely that theatre or performance use at the scale offered would be viable. Similarly the presence of a multiplex nearby at Lakeside means neither would there be sufficient need for a large cinema scheme which in any case would likely result in the auditorium being sub-divided. Pubs can constitute the optimum viable use for heritage assets such as the State and indeed there are a number of other former cinemas and theatres across the UK in pub and nightclub use which have maintained their building's character, significance and future reversibility. Pub use also ensures public access allowing greater appreciation of the internal significance of the asset.

With regards to the alterations proposed a change of use of this nature will necessitate interventions which cause some degree of harm to the building and results in some change or loss of historic character, fabric and features. In general terms this can be acceptable in principle assuming the most sensitive areas are preserved, reversibility isn't compromised and the building's significance isn't materially reduced. Further, the heritage and public benefits of returning buildings to active use provide some mitigation and justification. In this case we have some concerns with regards to what is being proposed and suggest further clarification on some matters should be sought and appropriate conditions put in place as part of any permission.

The bulk of changes are within the auditorium and elsewhere to the ground and first floors. Much of this is light-touch and reversible, such as the insertion of seating booths and the main bar/servery. The function of some spaces will be altered, for example female WCs switching to a recycling/bin store necessitating a new opening to an existing means of escape. The former restaurant to the first floor (circle) level will become the main bank of WCs. The former kitchen will become a staff area with WCs, changing rooms and staff room. In principle these are acceptable, assuming loss of historic fabric is minimised and a programme of recording is carried out.

There are also changes which seek to alter the building externally or represent more material interventions. This includes the addition of windows along the north and west elevations which are the side of the auditorium and behind the stage, plus some high level openings. Although resulting in change to the building's appearance which is regrettable, we understand the rationale because it will allow in natural light. This will be important for encouraging custom during the day which will contribute to the viability of the proposal. Nonetheless, such openings could be

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bricked up at a later date should the need arise. The existing shop units will be amalgamated into the State and will become the kitchen. The dressing rooms along with WCs and former shop access will become an external area, created through the removal of the flat roof structure above. Again, we have no objections to this.

Whilst in principle we do not object to the insertion of the bar, kitchen and WCs, these will require substantial servicing (for example electrics and pipework) and this could be very intrusive and result in irreversible alterations or harm to fabric. We suggest a condition would be required to seek approval of the detail and locations of service runs and penetration within the historic areas of the building, particularly within the first floor foyer and restaurant area where most WCs will be located. We also have concerns with regards to the treatment of historic plasterwork, particularly as application documents state that castings in good condition may become damaged from the removal of ceiling and will require replacement. There should be a condition relating to the methodology for works to historic plasterwork for which we suggest the following:

*Condition: Prior to commencement a detailed methodology for works to historic plasterwork in accordance with the Association of British Theatre Technicians Guidance Note 20 and Historic England guide for the care and management of fibrous plaster 'Historic Fibrous Plaster in the UK' is to be submitted to the Council for approval. Works undertaken must be in accordance with the approved methodology*

*Reason: to prevent further damage to the historic ceiling and to ensure that fibrous plaster ceiling and the structure / secondary structure supporting it are not damaged during the works.*

Also of vital importance are the works themselves which should be undertaken by an experienced contractor with specialist knowledge. We would recommend the following condition on that basis:

*Condition: Prior to commencement an experienced specialist contractor must be appointed to carry out any works to areas of historic fabric and significance, as agreed and approved by the Council in consultation with Historic England, Cinema Theatre Association and Theatres Trust*

*Reason: to prevent damage to the historic ceiling and other features of significance by ensuring works are carried out by appropriately qualified and experienced contractors*

The plans show little if any work to be carried out within the understage areas and upper levels. Although not public areas these contained some important features such as the organ pit and projector room. It would be beneficial for these areas to also be restored, so it should be clarified what the plan is for these areas and to ensure they are not harmed during works. The restoration of the organ would in particular be a beneficial project which was part of the previous application but forms part of no commitment within this one; it is listed as an aim and aspiration. Remaining cinema organs are a rarity and we urge full restoration.

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In conclusion we are supportive of the return to use of the State as a pub and accept that a degree of alteration and harm is necessary to achieve this. On balance we support the granting of planning permission and listed building consent, however this is conditional on the matters set out above being addressed.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or if you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI  
National Planning Adviser

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