

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1695

11 October 2021

Emma Carrington
Planning, Policy & Development Control Team
Staffordshire County Council
2 Staffordshire Place
Stafford
ST16 2DH

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

Application: 21/34713/FUL

Site: Former Sandonia Building Stafford Staffordshire

Proposal: Demolition of existing building

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 planning permission has come to the attention of the Trust because it is seeking demolition of the Sandonia Theatre. We have not been formally notified despite this application falling within our statutory remit as described above.

The Sandonia opened as a theatre in 1920 but by 1923 was predominantly a cinema but with some live performances continuing. In common with many other theatres and cinemas it was converted to bingo use in the 1960s. By 1991 the stalls were utilised as a snooker hall during which time a false ceiling was inserted between the stalls and the circle splitting the auditorium. The building is long and narrow with a grand white stone façade with semi-circular arch and circular windows either side with a garland and figure above each. To each side of the foyer were small shops. It was a well-equipped theatre with fly tower and eight dressing rooms. The auditorium had a long barrel-vaulted ceiling with parallel ribs which in later years was masked above the false ceiling. The proscenium arch was decorated with a large plaster motif depicting two female figures and the circle front showed Staffordshire knots. This type of design reflects early purpose-built cinemas of the few years preceding World War I, so the Sandonia is unusual in that respect as having been apparently purposed foremost as a theatre demonstrated by its

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

Interim Chair Paddy Dillon Director Jon Morgan

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

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund co-operates with the Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697

significant theatrical infrastructure and early programme. It was also a time of little money for new theatre projects, especially of a larger scale and outside of London.

The snooker hall closed around twenty years ago and the Sandonia has been vacant and in an increasingly deteriorating state since. This has been exacerbated by the illegal commencement of demolition works earlier in 2021. We understand much of the internal decorative plasterwork had already been removed but the proscenium figures were believed to remain. This has now been confirmed by the images submitted with this application which show the illegal works have exposed them to the elements. The image of the proscenium also helps emphasise how unusually narrow the building was considering its large capacity of 1,200. The façade remains intact, although is now shrouded in scaffolding.

The Sandonia is a non-designated heritage asset, with its striking front façade being well-regarded by local people and positively contributing to local townscape and character. Given the Sandonia has been altered with apparent significant loss of internal fabric it is questionable whether the building as a whole would meet the threshold for statutory listing. However, Historic England guidance on listing selection for Culture and Entertainment Buildings (2017) notes that theatres built after 1914 were “deliberately limited (in) their decoration” whereas the frontage of the Sandonia is clearly of more elaborate design. This makes it more unusual. Nonetheless, irrespective of any merit in statutory listing the Sandonia is certainly worthy of being added to a local heritage list were one to exist in Stafford.

This proposal seeks the complete loss of the Sandonia for which no justification is provided. Furthermore the application is for demolition only with no replacement proposal currently forthcoming. Paragraph 204 of the NPPF (2021) states local authorities should not permit loss of a heritage asset without taking reasonable steps to ensure new development will proceed. Paragraph 199 additionally gives great weight to the conservation of heritage assets. On that basis this proposal should be refused.

Paragraph 194 of the NPPF requires applicants to describe the significance of heritage assets affected by development including contribution to their setting. This is reflected within Policy N9 of the Plan for Stafford Borough (2014). The applicant also fails on this test as only a very brief statement has been provided which makes no reference or assessment of any heritage matters. In this instance we contend paragraph 196 should also be a material consideration because the illegal actions of the applicant have resulted in deliberate damage to the building which has impacted remaining features of significance and compromised options for full retention of the building.

The Sandonia was built as a theatre and although such use was only dominant for a relatively limited period after opening it remained in social and cultural use right up until its closure. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF guards against the loss of facilities. Evidence should also be provided to demonstrate that efforts to identify potential social, cultural and community use of this site have failed, particularly as we are aware of community interest in this building.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

Interim Chair Paddy Dillon Director Jon Morgan

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

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres
The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund co-operates with the Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697

Protecting theatres for **everyone**



Even if redevelopment for alternative uses is demonstrably the only realistic option for this site there is compelling merit in retaining at least the front façade of this building. This must be explored further and alternative options for this site put forward before a decision is made on any irreversible demolition works.

In conclusion we strongly object to these proposals and urge the refusal of planning permission.

If the Council is minded to grant permission for demolition, we request a detailed written and photographic recording condition for which the approval of Theatres Trust and other relevant consultees is achieved before discharge.

Please contact us if you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

Interim Chair Paddy Dillon Director Jon Morgan

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

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund co-operates with the Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697