

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/621

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Application: P21/1505

Site: Former Hippodrome and adjacent land and buildings, Castle Hill, Dudley

Proposal: Demolition of existing buildings and redevelopment for a higher education facility together with associated access, car parking and landscaping

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 notifying the Trust of this application for planning permission at the Hippodrome. This proposal seeks demolition of the Hippodrome and redevelopment of the site to construct a new higher education building for Dudley College. The Hippodrome is on the Trust's national Theatres at Risk register and has been since 2010.

We have had recent engagement with the Council and the applicant and were aware that following the successful award from the towns fund an application for demolition of the Hippodrome would be shortly forthcoming. Nonetheless, the Trust as a statutory consultee for this site **opposes** this scheme.

The Hippodrome is an undesignated heritage asset in a prominent location within the Dudley Town Centre Conservation Area, adjacent to the Castle Hill Conservation Area and within the setting of Dudley Castle which is part of the Black Country Unesco geopark. Although an undesignated heritage asset we consider there to be merit in statutory listing. Although previous

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

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application ten years ago to Historic England (English Heritage) was unsuccessful we would note that more recently there has been greater appreciation of inter-war cinemas and theatres. It is noted that the original Historic England report on the building is now known to contain some inaccuracies, such as the assumption that the original windows to the main façade had been lost. More recent investigation by the campaign group found the 1930's metal framed windows with original hardware remain in situ, boarded up but easily uncovered.

The Hippodrome opened in 1938 within a cluster of entertainment uses; the neighbouring site was the now-demolished Plaza Cinema and adjacent to the Plaza is the Grade II listed former Odeon. It replaced a previous theatre, the Opera House, which was destroyed by fire two years previous. Architecturally although built as a theatre it was designed in the style of a super cinema by local noted cinema architect Archibald Hurley Robinson. Hurley Robinson was a prolific designer of cinemas in particular within the local area. The Hippodrome is believed to be his one and only theatre. Historic England's entry for Hurley Robinson's Grade II listed Regal Cinema in Evesham notes him as '*a significant West Midlands-based architect*' going on to note that Hurley Robinson '*had designed over 55 cinemas before the Regal*'. Research by campaigners for the Hippodrome uncovered twenty-three cinemas local to the area designed by Hurley Robinson only two of which remain in cinema use, thirteen of which have been demolished and many of which have been substantially and irreversibly altered. The loss of the Hippodrome would add to current losses of the body of work by this significant but little researched architect.

The Hippodrome was built as a sister building to the adjacent Plaza Cinema, also designed by Hurley Robinson and since demolished, and was part of a grouping of Deco buildings forming Dudley's then entertainment hub. This includes the extant Odeon Cinema, now the Assembly Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Hippodrome was described as the 'Showplace of the West Midlands' and was a major touring venue for variety shows, pantomimes and entertainers of the time. Several notable acts and artists appeared including Laurel and Hardy, Bob Hope, Vera Lynn, Harry Secombe, Tommy Cooper, Morecombe and Wise and Cliff Richard. A period of mixed activity in the 1960s to the mid-1970s saw the Hippodrome used as a 'casino' and nightclub with various live shows and wrestling, again major UK and international stars continued to appear until a closing performance by Roy Orbison in 1974. It was then utilised full-time for bingo with its auditorium being little altered and decorative features and theatrical feel retained. It closed in 2009 and has been vacant since that time. As a result its condition has been deteriorating, but it was well maintained when in use.

We do not consider that the Hippodrome's potential to positively contribute economically and socially to the regeneration and revitalisation of Dudley, or its value and significance as a heritage asset, have been recognised or appreciated by the Council. Demolition represents a lost opportunity, particularly as a large multi-purpose entertainment venue for the town is being considered. The Hippodrome could have fulfilled that function at a capacity and scale compatible with Dudley's size and catchment and that met the needs of established touring products and promoters. Efforts to promote restoration and return to use of the Hippodrome and in turn identify and progress necessary funding opportunities have been undermined by lack of support

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from the Council as the freeholder and previous efforts to demolish the building. The Trust has regularly contacted the Council to outline our concerns and encourage feasibility of retention to be explored within options for the site.

As a non-designated heritage asset, paragraph 194 of the NPPF (2021) requires the significance of affected heritage assets to be described. The applicant's Heritage Statement provides a thorough appraisal of the history of the Hippodrome and its surrounding context. However, we do not agree with all aspects of the report's analysis of the Hippodrome's significance. For example, as stated above there is now greater appreciation of buildings from the 1930s so refusal to list in 2011 due to the Hippodrome's late date wouldn't necessarily count against it now. As noted above, there are also a number of assumptions within the Historic England's 2011 report which more recent investigation by local campaign groups have proven to be incorrect, such as the loss of the windows to the main façade. Neither is it necessarily significant that the Hippodrome is not included on the Council's local heritage list; we consider there to be great merit in its addition but given the Council's ownership and continued effort to demolish it is not necessarily an objective party should the list have been reviewed.

Paragraph 4.19 states the Hippodrome's significance has been diminished by substantial additions. Whilst we acknowledge structural steelwork within the fly tower would need to be removed and the foyer has been significantly altered, we do not consider this substantial. It is common for bingo halls to have inserted booths, bars and other installations but these tend to be lightweight additions and easily removable/reversible. Historic England's 2011 listing report notes that '*The chief structural features of the auditorium of the Hippodrome remain intact. This includes the seating; the single, deep balcony; and the fan-shaped auditorium. Decoration is still extant in the form of grilles and ribbed and fluted decoration around the stage boxes, proscenium arch and across the ceilings*'. It is clear from photographs that this is indeed the case. It is further clear that the overall volume of the building remains intact and that the original design intent is clear and that the building could, relatively easily, be restored to its former glory. The campaign group has suggested that some of the original painted decoration also survives intact behind later reversible additions to the building. This would be a rare find and deserving of further investigation. Therefore, the position stated within this paragraph conflicts with our own understanding and assessment of the Hippodrome as an expert body.

Paragraph 4.21 on aesthetic value needs to be considered in context; we disagree with the applicant's contention the Hippodrome is of "limited aesthetic value". Exteriors of theatres and cinemas are often utilitarian by necessity. The primary front façade is currently undermined by the building's vacancy, and with activity and re-establishment of signage, lighting, and uncovering the original windows and other decorative features it could once again make a positive contribution to its setting within the conservation area. Whilst we agree the Hippodrome is no longer seen in the context originally intended as a neighbour to the Plaza, there are opportunities for new development around a revitalised Hippodrome to address this and enhance views from the Castle Hill conservation area in particular.

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We also disagree with the report's assessment of communal value. A number of theatres were indeed lost or converted to bingo and other uses (or demolished) although at the time they did not benefit from the planning considerations in place today. The Hippodrome's final performance was in 1974, two years before formation of Theatres Trust which was initiated precisely because of concern over losses of theatres. We would also note that a number of former cinemas and theatres have been returned to cinema and performance use over that time and especially in more recent years. We would highlight in particular significant schemes in Bradford, Stockton-on-Tees and Walthamstow which with the support of the respective local authorities are being seen as key opportunities for town centre rejuvenation. The Hippodrome could play this role within Dudley. Whilst the 1960s and early 1970s period saw a broader entertainment role for the Hippodrome beyond theatre, it held a number of significant concerts during that time with major international artists. A multi-purpose cultural venue would potentially provide a sustainable model for the Hippodrome today, representing an optimal viable use.

Therefore we do not consider the heritage implications of the Hippodrome's demolition to have been sufficiently understood or justified, particularly given this proposal results in total loss of the asset. As the national advisory public body for theatres and a statutory consultee the Council should take account of our evidence and expertise, with reference to NPPF paragraph 195. In turn we do not consider paragraph 197 to have been met because there is potentially a viable use for the Hippodrome consistent with its conservation and we consider there is a great opportunity for the Hippodrome to make a positive contribution to Dudley's economic vitality and to the social and cultural well-being of its residents. We strongly disagree the Hippodrome has low heritage significance, particularly internally, and also disagree the level of harm is at the lower end of less than substantial.

There is a complete lack of evidence to support loss of the Hippodrome as a social and cultural facility. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2019) guards against the unnecessary loss of facilities. Policy EMP6 of the Black County Core Strategy (2011) also provides local guidance to support local community and cultural facilities and states that such facilities 'will be protected and, where necessary enhanced, promoted and expanded'. This proposal fails to do that.

There is no evidence to demonstrate lack of need for the Hippodrome, particularly as the existence of the Friends of Dudley Hippodrome group and positive media coverage shows will and desire amongst the community for the Hippodrome retained. The Council has indicated interest in new cultural provision including a large-scale venue but there does not appear to have been proper consideration of what is required for the town. The Town Hall provides a good local facility for performance and is well-regarded by its users it has no fly tower and a relatively limited capacity. Therefore the types of shows it can accept are constrained and it constitutes a different and complementary offer to the Hippodrome. Whilst the Hippodrome was most recently in bingo use, this is itself a social and cultural use which should be protected unless objective and robust evidence suggests otherwise. Therefore this proposal is in conflict with relevant local and national policies on loss of facilities.

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It is notable there is very limited reference to loss of a community or cultural facility within the Planning Statement; Section 6 states consultation has been carried out with us due to the proposed loss of a cultural venue. The only limited justification is provided within paragraph 8.15 which states, "reuse as a theatre or an alternative cultural or community facility has been fully explored by Dudley Council in consultation with the local community, but no viable use could be found". We are not aware of an objective detailed study having been carried out and as noted within our comments above we have made several approaches to the Council. We contend there is potentially a compatible and viable opportunity to return the Hippodrome to performance use. This application provides no evidence to the contrary that would enable us to withdraw objection.

The Planning Statement discusses the replacement building design having a 'net zero carbon' aspiration. Whilst that might be achieved in isolation for its operation it is not clear how that corresponds with the significant negative environmental impacts associated with demolition, disposal and reconstruction. For example an Architects Journal article estimated the demolition of Derby's Assembly Rooms venue would cost 11,400 tonnes of carbon dioxide, equivalent to 37% of the city's annual total emissions. Generally re-use and adaption represents the optimal environmental approach. It is therefore important that the impact of demolition is included when considering the overall carbon footprint of the new building to avoid significant conflict with the Council's Declaration of a Climate Emergency for Dudley.

In conclusion, we strongly object to this application on the basis of complete loss of an undesignated heritage asset without sufficient justification and loss of a social and cultural facility without evidence or justification. We consider there to be alternative options for the Hippodrome's retention which would provide considerable economic and social benefits for Dudley. Therefore we urge that planning permission is refused.

We request that we are notified when this application is referred to the Council's Planning Committee for determination. If the Council is minded to grant permission for the Hippodrome's demolition there must be a recording condition requiring full survey of the building and submission of a detailed photographic recording report to be made available for public display. We urge that the consent and approval of Theatres Trust is sought before such a condition is discharged. This is to ensure future generations are able to access and understand information on the Hippodrome and its significance architecturally and for the people of Dudley.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you wish to discuss these comments further.

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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