

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1667

26 July 2022

Development Management
City Development
Sunderland City Council
PO Box 102
Civic Centre
Sunderland
SR2 7DN

By e-mail: dc@sunderland.gov.uk

Application: 22/01267/LBC

Site: Empire Theatre Empire Buildings 4 - 5 High Street West Sunderland SR1 3EZ

Proposal: Excavation works to facilitate installation of replacement Orchestra Pit Lift.

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 is seeking listed building consent for internal alterations to install an orchestra pit lift at the Sunderland Empire. The purpose of these works is to provide two additional rows of seating which will increase the capacity of the theatre for some shows.

The Empire is a Grade II* listed heritage asset recognising that it is an important building of more than special interest. It opened in 1906 and was designed by local architects W and T. R Milburn. They already had some experience of theatres by this point having worked on significant alterations to the Empire Palace in Newcastle in 1899 and Sunderland's Palace Theatre (now demolished) in 1903. This project helped raise their profile and they went on to become significant architects of cinemas and theatres nationally with their works including the Dominion in London's West End, the Mayflower in Southampton, the New Theatre in Oxford and the Festival in Edinburgh. The Empire is a rare survivor of the Milburn's earlier work, the examples cited date from the late 1920s and early 1930s and are very different in style.

Theatres Trust

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Chair Dave Moutrey **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Paul Cartwright, James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Lucy Osborne, 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

The Empire was built as a variety theatre with its opening show featuring Vesta Tilley, one of the best known stars of the era. In the early days it also showed films. Seating was provided on four levels within its wide auditorium with two large boxes and smaller boxes within six-bay arcades either side of the dress circle which are richly decorated. The auditorium features Baroque plasterwork and detailing and is almost unaltered. Externally the theatre has a curved corner entrance with circular domed tower above with projecting cornice and oeil-de-boeuf dormers and Arts and Crafts bow windows to upper floors along Garden Place.

In 1960 the Empire was acquired by the Council which was an unusual move at the time given the nature of the venue. In 1989 the theatre was given an extension to provide a bar, and in 2004 it was closed for a number of months in order to redevelop its stage house to facilitate the staging of larger shows. It is an important cultural venue not just for Sunderland but the wider north-east, being a preferred option for some producers given its capacity and infrastructure. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

Given the high architectural and historic significance of the Empire, its Grade II* listing and that this proposal will be creating alteration within its sensitive auditorium including a new access hatch in the steeldeck between the existing front two rows, new steeldeck floor infill and replacement stage edge we would expect submission of an appropriately detailed Heritage Statement to fully explain and justify these works as set out within paragraph 194 of the NPPF and paragraph 9 of planning guidance on the Historic Environment (2019). This is not just to aid decision making with regards to this specific application but also to assist understanding of the theatre's development in the future. Currently the Heritage Statement consists of a brief overview of the project and thus is not consistent with the level of proportionality required by policy. We recommend this is addressed.

Notwithstanding the above, we understand the rationale for these works and the benefits it will bring to the theatre in terms of further increasing its attractiveness to producers, improving safety and working conditions within the pit and increasing its revenue generation which will help conserve this important asset into the future. We note the comments of the Council's Conservation Officer in support of this scheme which highlights that the visual impact of the replacement lift will be minimal as will the impact on existing historic features.

Therefore we could conditionally support the granting of listed building consent subject to the submission of further supporting information.

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



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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