

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/3790

28 September 2022

Sean Davies
Spatial Planning
Torbay Council
Electric House
Castle Circus
Torquay
TQ1 3DR

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

Application: P/2022/0731

Site: Central Cinema 29 Abbey Road Torquay TQ2 5NQ

Proposal: Change of use from cinema to theatre, community art centre and office space with accompanying alterations.

Remit:

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 change of use to a theatre and associated arts/community uses along with alterations. The building nonetheless falls within our statutory remit because it was originally built as a theatre before later converting to full-time cinema use.

The Central originally opened in 1871 on the site of earlier assembly rooms and was known as both the Royal Assembly Rooms and Lyceum Theatre depending upon what was being held. It was extended in 1880 by noted theatre architect Charles Phipps, who also oversaw further extension in 1888. At this time it was re-named the Royal Theatre and Opera House. It first saw cinema use in 1915, and this became full-time with the final live show being in 1931. It was again remodelled in 1933 and re-named in 1937 when it was taken on by the Odeon chain. It was subdivided in 1974 to create two screens and after a brief period of closure at the end of 1999 it was re-opened and further divided. It closed in April of this year when its operator moved to a new venue.

Theatres Trust

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

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

Architecturally the basic structural shell from the 1888 works survives with parts believed to be earlier. To the frontage the three arched doorways with three-bay columned loggia above are original although some elements of the façade are from the 1933 works and is later modern signage. To the rear elevation on Lower Union Lane is original stone rubble walling with later brickwork. A substantial level change between the front and rear meant audiences descended to the stalls level from the main foyer. It has been altered internally (although original features and plan form may survive) but can be considered a non-designated heritage asset.

The building was purchased upon being vacated by the cinema operator and gifted to a local theatre group the Unleashed Theatre Company. They are seeking through this application to revert the building back to theatre use with a main auditorium and supporting spaces along with associated external alterations and repairs. We were contacted by the applicant earlier in 2022 and provided them with some guidance on business planning and general advice on the building.

We welcome these proposals. The auditorium's capacity of will complement the range of existing theatre spaces available in Torquay being smaller than the Little Theatre (240 seats), the Babbacombe Theatre at 600 seats and the much larger Princess Theatre. In turn this will further improve the social and cultural well-being of local people. The facility also offers a wider suite of arts and community functions including a studio/dance hall with a foyer and bar/kitchenette which suggests this could also be utilised for small performances, functions, events and general hire. There are also offices and meeting rooms. With the existing cinema having been re-provided elsewhere this proposal constitutes an uplift in cultural provision and keeps this non-designated heritage asset within a compatible (and in part its original) use. This meets the tests of Policy TC5 of the Local Plan, particularly parts 1 and 2. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF also seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature, as well as seeking to guard against the loss of facilities and ensure they can be developed, modernised and retained for the benefit of the community.

Plans show the building to in effect be operated in two parts, the theatre being at the upper levels (ground and first) with the wider community functions at lower ground and basement accessed from what is currently an escape onto Lower Union Lane. There will be internal access between the two, although not for wheelchair users. A lift will be installed between the lower levels but it appears from the plans that locating a lift between the ground floor and first floor may be challenging without compromising other necessary facilities due to constraints within the building, nonetheless if an opportunity for full accessibility can be identified in future this is something that would be encouraged. The ground floor is accessible for both the auditorium and bar/foyer but wheelchair users and those with reduced mobility would need to exit the building to move between them which should be avoided if possible. A platform lift is being installed into the auditorium and we suggest this could be an option to/from the foyer, or for it to be ramped dependent on practicality. Accessible WCs are however being provided within both areas, although the one to the foyer looks tight and it should be ensured there is sufficient turning space. Specific seating plans for the auditorium are not included but the applicant will need to ensure that suitable wheelchair places are made available; for best practice these should be in a variety of locations but we appreciate with this being re-use of a historic building there are

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

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

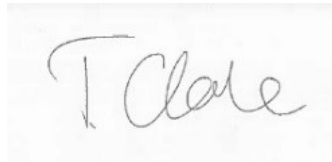
constraints. It appears however that wheelchair places would be possible on two of the highest three tiers.

There is only one single large dressing room indicated with two small individual changing rooms at either end. For reasons of safeguarding given the likelihood of children and young people performing at this venue there should be three dressing rooms so some thought will need to be given as to how other spaces such as the upstairs rooms or lower meeting room and office cubicles could be flexibly utilised if necessary and for these to be designed accordingly.

We are supportive of the proposed external alterations. The rear (north) elevation is quite utilitarian and generally less sensitive than the front and is not in optimal condition with signs of some damage/deterioration in places and use of a variety of materials for past repairs and alterations. The fire exit to Lower Union Lane will be opened up with new windows and signage to provide a main entrance to the wider arts facility. This will positively activate and enhance the setting of this part of the town centre. There will be a further large window towards the western end of this elevation and currently boarded windows opened up. We welcome incorporation of a living wall which will further add interest, although it will need to be ensured that this part of the building is in good repair beforehand. To the front (south) elevation the replacement of the current insensitive modern canopy/signage with glazed canopy to reflect a period style constitutes a heritage benefit and will enhance the building's appearance.

To conclude whilst we have noted matters for further consideration and possible revision these are internal and can be managed by the applicant as appropriate. We can provide them with further advice and assistance should they require it. We welcome this project and are supportive of the granting of planning permission.

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



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser