

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1980

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**Application:** 22/04228/FUL & 22/04229/LBC

**Site:** 6-7 Arts Theatre St Edwards Passage Cambridge Cambridgeshire CB2 3PJ

**Proposal:** Refurbishment of auditorium and back of house spaces; demolition of disused restaurant area and creation of new studio theatre. New entrance doors and goods lift off St Edwards Passage access and minor alterations to fenestration to rear of Spalding Hostel.

## **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:**

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at the Arts Theatre. We have been engaged on these proposals at pre-application stage going back to 2021, meeting with the applicant twice. We have been supportive of their plans.

The Arts is the largest theatre in the city and an important arts and cultural asset, both contributing to the social and cultural well-being of local people as well as boosting the local economy through bringing in additional visitors. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF (2021) seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

The theatre is run by a local trust. Its programme largely consists of touring theatre productions along with some talks, comedy and other events. A number of renowned actors have performed and acclaimed directors have brought shows. It was built in 1936 by economist John Keynes, a bursar at Kings College, who was also founder of the Arts Council. It has a capacity of 671 seats

## **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

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across stalls and circle. Its décor dates from the 1930s and has seen two rounds of major works, in the mid-1990s for a refit of the auditorium and development of front and back of house facilities and in 2013 for redevelopment of its front of house and a new main entrance. The theatre is within the Central Conservation Area and is Grade II listed; aside from remaining interest and significance of its inter-war auditorium (this area was heavily altered in the 1993 works) parts of the building are much older with its front entrance being early 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the western part of the building is 17<sup>th</sup> Century featuring a dated gable pendant stating '1661'. It is the latter older parts that are specifically cited within the Historic England list description.

These plans mark a further significant project for the theatre and there are three core elements. The first is a further refurbishment of the auditorium, with it being almost thirty years since the previous works. The second is to utilise the theatre's redundant top floor restaurant area including part-demolition and extension to provide a new secondary studio theatre which will enhance the theatre's facilities and flexibility and broaden the range and scale of shows it can handle. The third is to alter its main entrance. Alongside this will be associated works. We are supportive of the principle of these proposals and welcome the investment being made into the theatre which will help reinforce its cultural offer and value, optimise its facilities and help sustain it into the future.

We have dealt with the different elements in turn.

## Auditorium refurbishment

With the previous refurbishment having completed over 26 years ago there would be merit in seeking an upgrade to ensure the theatre meets the standards of comfort and maintenance expected by audiences. Substantial changes are proposed with an intended outcome of optimising accessibility and circulation, acoustics and sightlines. Much of these are common shortcomings and challenges faced by operators of older theatre buildings. The previous alterations caused loss of significance and original features and character within the auditorium and this provides an opportunity for more substantial intervention and to potentially seek to reinstate historic character. The applicant has provided photographic evidence of current deficiencies and opportunities for improvement including open cabling, installation of 'temporary' technical facilities and fabric which is in poor repair.

These plans in terms of décor will see new timber linings to the walls and new curved balcony fronts which will extend to the location of existing boxes which are to be opened up to provide slip seating. These positions will be more usable than the existing boxes. There will be a reconfiguration of seating positions with aisles at both levels moved towards the perimeter to provide better sight-lines. The changes will increase the number of wheelchair positions in the stalls which is particularly welcomed. Additionally there will be a transfer seat provided at circle level.

To the rear of the circle on either side will be new lobbies to provide better acoustic insulation which in turn will reduce disturbance and improve the experience of audiences, particularly with

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there being potential for movement of audiences and users of the new secondary performance space in the studio above.

Plaster reliefs will be relocated to allow greater appreciation, which can be considered a heritage benefit. There will be an upgrade of technical infrastructure.

Overall these interventions within the auditorium mark a further substantial alteration and re-fit of this space. However we consider them to be a broad improvement on the existing scheme and will be a closer representation of the original design intention. Moreover they will deliver public benefits through a layout which is more functional, improves the experience of audiences and expands wheelchair provision and accessibility. Therefore we are supportive of these plans.

### Loss of restaurant/Development of studio theatre

To the top floor is a restaurant which was not successful and was taken out of use some time ago, leaving a substantial part of the building vacant. It is modern in build and appearance with a glazed atrium. This area will be amalgamated with office space to the level below and converted into a studio theatre with a capacity of up to 200 people. Its volume will be further expanded through removal of the existing roof and replacement with a new roof which will be a green roof with solar panels. This will help mitigate the environmental impact of these works and contribute towards reducing the theatre's ongoing operating costs. We consider the design and scale of the extension to be compatible with the building's wider setting.

This studio will afford additional flexibility for the theatre. It will allow it to host a broader range of shows and events including supporting smaller and newer shows, emerging artists and local groups. This will further strengthen the role of the theatre as a cultural asset for the city, and optimise use of the building by potentially enabling it to host performances whilst the main auditorium is out of use. The studio could also be utilised for private functions, hire and rehearsals which will further diversify the theatre's income potential and contribute towards its financial sustainability. The format of the studio will be typically flexible, enabling different configurations and capacities.

We would encourage the theatre to consider its programming for the studio theatre to ensure it complements rather than competes with the offer at the ADC Theatre (which has a broadly similar capacity) and maximises the cultural benefit for Cambridge from these plans.

### Alteration to Peas Hill entrance

Until the previous set of works in 2013 this functioned as the main entrance to the theatre. Despite the theatre's size and importance its means of entry can be considered to be understated with a lack of prominence and visibility. These proposals will to some extent reverse some of the previous changes, with a canopy to Peas Hill being reinstated and the door arrangement being rearranged. The canopy will again help the building to become more

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identifiable as a theatre and place of entertainment, assisted by potential for the display of show posters either side of the entry doors.

This part of the theatre is explicitly covered by the Grade II listing. The current entry doors and glazing are modern whereas this proposal will install timber door and window frames with timber risers below on either side. We consider this to be more sensitive and consistent with the character and appearance of surrounding units.

#### General refurbishments

Front of house facilities including the WCs and cloakrooms and back of house facilities including dressing rooms, crew rooms and workshops will also be redecorated and upgraded. Again this is supported, particularly given the number of WCs will be increased.

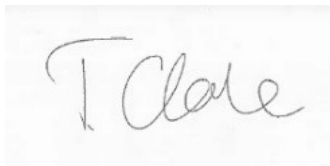
#### Concluding comments

We consider these proposals to be beneficial to the function of the theatre and the comfort and experience of audiences and other users, achieved sensitively given the constraints of the building's statutory listing and wider setting within the Central Conservation Area.

Policy 73 of the Cambridge Local Plan (2018) supports the enhancement of community and leisure facilities, which Table 8.3 confirms to include theatres. This proposal will meet part a. through improving all of the range, quality and accessibility of its facilities. We also consider there to be need and demand for its expanded cultural provision and that the existing central location is optimal for the wider community it serves.

Therefore we are supportive of the granting of planning permission and listed building consent for this project.

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



Tom Clarke MRTPI  
National Planning Adviser