

Protecting theatres
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Ref.: TC/1924

13 December 2023

Barbara Kirkbride
Liverpool City Council
Cunard Building
Water Street
Liverpool
L3 1AH

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

Application: 23F/2966

Site: The Courtyard, 89 Roe Street, Liverpool, L1 1EP

Proposal: To demolish existing Courtyard Bar and erect 4 storey building with basement and external roof terrace, to provide exhibition space; ancillary workshop accommodation; restaurant and other visitor amenities; additional backstage area for the adjacent Royal Court Theatre; and associated external works, including minor works to the northern façade of the listed theatre

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 this application for planning permission at

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

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

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the Royal Court Theatre. It seeks to redevelop the theatre's Courtyard Bar. We have also provided comment on the corresponding application for listed building consent under separate cover.

The Royal Court Theatre was built in 1938 by local architect James Bushell Hutchins in an art deco style following the previous building having been destroyed by fire a few years previous. This appears to have been Hutchins' only theatre project. The Royal Court survived the destruction of many buildings around it during World War II. It was designated as a Grade II listed heritage asset in 1990. In 2012 there was a refurbishment programme which saw internal repainting, replacement of seating and cabaret-style layout in the stalls. The theatre was extended in 2015 to provide a new box office and additional bar space with the previous box office becoming a multi-purpose space. Alongside this was further improvements to front and back of house areas. A pub to the rear was acquired and in 2018 was converted into an externally-accessed bar and restaurant; this is the part of the site subject to this application. Internally the theatre has a nautical theme to reflect Liverpool's history with the basement lounge and bar said to be a replica of the main lounge of the Queen Mary. The auditorium is richly decorated with the ceiling curved in a series of arches with concealed lighting. The Royal Court is well regarded by local people and is a significant venue which forms a key part of Liverpool's renowned cultural offer. It produces its own works with a particular focus on locally-themed shows. Paragraph 93 of the NPPF seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

We commented on and supported a similar scheme in 2022. Since that time plans and designs have been comprehensively revised. We undertook a site visit in September 2023.

This proposal will now be called the Sir Ken Dodd Happiness Centre in honour of Sir Ken Dodd who was an iconic comedian, singer and actor who was born locally and performed many times in the city. It was at the Royal Court where Dodd set the world record for the longest session of jokes, telling 1,500 in three-and-a-half hours. Dodd's 'trademark' was his tickling sticks and this proposal includes a tickle stick public sculpture to be placed within the public realm adjacent to the Royal Court. In principle we support this along with the overall public realm strategy which will feature planting and Dodd's jokes within the paving although these appear to fall outside of the scope of this specific application.

Compared to the previous scheme the internal layouts are substantially different. At basement level the function of the previous scheme wasn't clear from the proposed plans but now contains back of house servicing functions with a kitchen, cellar and

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store. There will also be access from the St John's car park behind which we assume will be for servicing and/or staff. It is not clear if this was there previously but it will provide the theatre with additional operational flexibility.

At ground floor level the café is now larger with a revised WC layout. This will enable a Changing Places facility which is welcomed and will enhance the theatre's inclusivity.

To the first floor will be a larger dining area and again a revised WC layout which provides two additional WCs one of which will be accessible. There will be office space above the loading bay which was previously a void along with a new opening into the original theatre building which will make movement around the whole building easier.

The second floor now has a studio space with indicative cabaret seating and a bar in the corner but it is stated this is a flexible space which could be used for events, workshops and rehearsals. This will enable the theatre to host a wider range of performances and events, both improving its ability to generate income to support its cultural programme and adding to the diversity of spaces available within the city p. There are further WCs (six of which one is accessible). Additional dressing rooms at this level have been relocated to above service bay, again one is accessible. These could serve both the original theatre and the new studio space.

At third floor level there is a new Sir Ken Dodd exhibition hall with a small presentation/cinema room. This is in effect a museum within the theatre which will broaden the Royal Court's arts and cultural offer further and also help encourage more visitors into the building who can potentially engage with its wider offer. Previously this level was all office space. A smaller office is now located above the loading bay with further new opening into original theatre.

In terms of layout and function we consider this to be a well laid out scheme which will work well for the theatre operationally and which meets the objectives of the project and the investment being made into the theatre. Policy EC4 of the Liverpool Local Plan 2013-2033 (2022) is supportive of proposals which enhances and expands Liverpool's cultural facilities.

Similarly we are supportive of the design approach for this extension including the projection onto the building and the 'smile' design feature. We consider that this scheme complements the appearance and significance of the existing theatre as a designated heritage asset as well as that of its wider setting. With reference to part 3.b of Policy HD1 and paragraph 202 of the NPPF (2023) this scheme also provides

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a public benefit which, our support for design of the scheme notwithstanding, mitigates the impact of this additional development.

We welcome and support this project and therefore recommend the granting of planning permission.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss this representation in greater detail.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "T Clarke". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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