

Ref.: TC/379

15 March 2024

Tom Bradfield
Reading Borough Council
Civic Offices
Bridge Street
Reading
RG1 2LU

By e-mail: tom.bradfield@reading.gov.uk

Application: 240063

Site: The Hexagon Queens Walk Reading RG1 7UA

Proposal: Demolition of some of the existing back of house areas and erection of an extension of the existing Hexagon Theatre to provide a new studio auditorium, flexible rehearsal space, community studio with workshop space and back of house space, along with improved public realm by providing a new podium connection between the new proposed extension and Queens Walk, along with other associated works

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'.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

Telephone 020 7836 8591 **Email** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **Website** theatrestrust.org.uk **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Jon Morgan

Trustees James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Lucy Osborne, 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

Comment:

This application for planning permission was brought to the attention of Theatres Trust because it is seeking to construct an extension to the Hexagon Theatre, as well as partial demolition of some existing back of house areas. We have not been formally notified despite this falling within our statutory remit outlined above. We have been engaged in this project at pre-application stage. We also wrote in support of the Council's application to the Levelling Up fund in 2022, which included this project.

The Hexagon was designed in 1977 by Robert Matthew, Joseph-Marshall & Partners which was a notable firm of architects who also designed the Royal Festival Hall. It was built to fill a gap in provision in the town following the earlier demolition of the Palace Theatre. Its name reflects the shape of the building's exterior and the form of its auditorium. The Hexagon was praised at the time of construction for its radical appearance and technology, being one of the first venues to have assisted resonance designed into it for day-to-day variation of acoustics. The main auditorium has a flexible function and capacity enabling use for a range of performance types. It is one of just a handful of multi-purpose venues built around that time. Its programme predominantly includes theatre, comedy, live music and concerts. It is an important cultural venue for the town and its wider catchment.

Although a listing application was turned down by Historic England recently, we consider the Hexagon to be a significant theatre of its time. It can be considered as a non-designated heritage asset.

This proposal will add an extension to the Hexagon's northern elevation to provide a studio theatre with associated dressing rooms and other back of house facilities, a rehearsal studio, bar and foyer and community space. The principle of these works and the expansion of the Hexagon's facilities, flexibility and offer to the community is supported, as noted in our support for the funding bid in 2022.

In architectural and heritage terms, we consider that the extension is sensitively designed with little impact on the original plan form of the existing theatre. This includes ensuring the new building is subservient to the original which results in relatively low floor to ceiling heights at upper levels, although these nonetheless appear adequate for currently proposed purposes, but on balance this is the right approach. The overall footprint available for the extension is limited but the space has been utilised effectively, although a necessary compromise is that the bar and foyer space is less than might be optimum. There is however good visual connection between the various spaces.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

Telephone 020 7836 8591 **Email** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **Website** theatrestrust.org.uk **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Jon Morgan

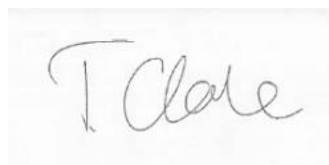
Trustees James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Lucy Osborne, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

There will also be general operational improvements. The relocation of the theatre's get-in is on balance in a better position, particularly as it should allow for continued access whilst future redevelopment around the Hexagon takes place. There will be improved accessibility including provision of a Changing Places facility and an optimised layout. There will also be improved public realm and better activation and prominence of the Hexagon. The extension is being designed to be highly energy efficient and sustainable. This is all welcomed.

We consider it important that the Hexagon remains readable in its own right and we believe the proposed extension achieves this. The northern elevation where the extension is located is to an extent less sensitive. With reference to paragraph 209 of the NPPF (2023) there is relatively little loss of the original building and significance, nonetheless the proposed development provides substantial public benefit for the venue and the town as a whole.

In conclusion, we are supportive of the granting of planning permission.

Please engage with Theatres Trust further should plans be subsequently revised.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

Telephone 020 7836 8591 **Email** info@theatrestrust.org.uk **Website** theatrestrust.org.uk **Twitter** @TheatresTrust

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Jon Morgan

Trustees James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Lucy Osborne, 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