

The Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 F 020 7836 3302
info@theatrestrust.org.uk www.theatrestrust.org.uk

Please contact: Ms Bridget Pereira

26 August 2010

Mr Eric Branse-Instone
Adviser, North
37 Tanner Row
York
North Yorkshire YO1 6WP



Dear Mr Branse-Instone,

Futurist Theatre, Foreshore Road, Scarborough, North Yorkshire, YO11 1NT

I am writing with regard to the current application for the statutory listing of the *Futurist Theatre*, Scarborough. The Theatres Trust **supports** the application and recommends that it be included on the statutory list. Our recommendation is based on the theatre's rarity value as an early 'pre-talkies' era super-cinema with the earliest surviving use of clear sightlines to the screen from all seats, the architectural strength of the existing Carraraware facade and the building's various close historical associations with nationally important people and events.

Remit

The Theatres Trust is The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres. The Town & Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995, Article 10, Para (v) requires the Trust to be consulted on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre.' It was established by The Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres'. This applies to all theatre buildings, old and new, in current use, in other uses, or disused. It also includes buildings or structures that have been converted to theatre, circus buildings and performing art centres. Our main objective is to safeguard theatre use, or the potential for such use, but we also provide expert advice on design, conservation, property and planning matters to theatre operators, local authorities and official bodies.

Advice/comment**Background and History**

The history of the *Futurist* begins with an entrepreneur and a band of entertainers towards the close of the Nineteenth Century. Will Catlin (William Fox), 'King of the pierrots', theatre impresario and owner of the *Futurist* began his lifelong association with the world of theatre in 1894 as manager of one of the first troupe of pierrots. *Catlin's Favourite Pierrots* performed on a makeshift stage on Scarborough's South Bay Sands meters away from the current site of the *Futurist*. Early pierrot shows pioneered a new form of British popular theatre and consisted of songs, dances, comic sketches and occasional monologues. *Catlin's Favourite Pierrots* (later known as *Catlin's Royal Pierrots*) were widely recognised as one of the
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best and most famous of these acts. Catlin was also among the first to employ modern publicity methods in order to promote his troupe by selling postcards at performances (Figs.i &ii) and meeting newly arrived holidaymakers at the railway station to advertise the shows. Voted the most popular entertainment group in the country by readers of a national newspaper in 1912, they became an established feature of seaside entertainment in Scarborough and throughout coastal Britain until the outbreak of the Second World War.

By 1903 escalating rental fees for a pitch on the sands persuaded Catlin to buy a plot of land on which he built a modest open air theatre named the *Arcadia*. He replaced this with the *Palladium Cinema* in 1912 which continued to operate until 1921. By then cinema was the dominant entertainment medium and the *Palladium* cinema had become too small to accommodate the growing audience numbers. In response to popular demand Catlin commissioned the theatre architect Frank Tugwell (Fig.iii) to build the *Futurist*, a state of the art super-cinema equipped with variety facilities and a sumptuous American Ice Cream and Soda Fountain Saloon- the first of its kind in the country- on a site adjacent to the *Palladium*, at a cost of £80,000. Against a backdrop of rising unemployment, the opulent interiors and palatial facade offered an escape from the harsh realities of daily life where, for a few short hours men and women of all social classes could enjoy the latest in mass entertainment in luxurious surroundings. The *Futurist* continued as predominantly a cinema until 1957 when it was converted into a theatre. By then such world famous talents as the ballerina Anna Pavlova had appeared there, putting the theatre firmly on the map as an important venue both locally and nationally.

In 1966 *The Futurist* (and the rest of the block including the *Palladium* and restaurant) was sold to the theatrical producer Robert Luff and became home to the stage version of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*. Although now largely airbrushed from the BBC's collective consciousness, the weekly television programme rapidly became a phenomenon and is remembered as one of the most popular Saturday night fixtures in British light entertainment (Fig.v).

Architectural and Historic Merit

When cinema construction resumed some years after the end of the First World War, vast new picture palaces were built in Britain's major cities, influenced by the styles developed in the United States. Most super-cinemas were constructed in a wave of cinema construction which began from around the mid-twenties onwards, although the earliest cinema approaching super-cinema proportions is generally thought to be the *Grange Cinema Kilburn* of 1914. The *Brighton Regent* (1921) is recognised to be the earliest of these post-war picture palaces but has now regrettably been demolished. As a result, the *Futurist* (1921) exists as one of the earliest and largest surviving examples of a purpose built super-cinema in Britain and is also the earliest surviving example of a cinema designed with clear sightlines to the screen from all seats. Built in 1921, *The Futurist* pre-dates the advent of the 'talkies' which were first shown in the mid-1920's. It is also the only cinema designed by the acclaimed theatre architect Frank Tugwell and one of his last remaining buildings in existence. Tugwell's contribution to theatre design was significant and has latterly been acknowledged in a series of listings of many of his theatres. His notable works include the *Harrogate Theatre* (Grand Opera House, Grade II listed), the internal reconstruction of the *London Savoy Theatre* (Grade II* listed) and the *Scarborough Opera House* (demolished despite its Grade II listed status). In addition, his influence can be seen in the work of the internationally renowned architect and recipient of the RIBA Gold Medal, Sir Edwin Cooper, who was articled to Tugwell's practice (Hall & Tugwell) in Scarborough. Tugwell's influence is particularly evident in Cooper's neo-classical design for the *NatWest Headquarters* formally the National Provincial Bank (1932), Princes Street, London (Fig. vi).

Architecturally the *Futurist* sits on the cusp between the more traditional neo-classical theatre design and the arrival of art deco style, and demonstrates a neat fusion of progressive construction techniques coupled with elegant classicism. The original design included staggered hanging balloon lights and a perforated illuminated dome decorated in clouds and stars, in addition to provision for a full orchestra to

accompany the silent films and an organ purchased at a premium cost of £5000. When first opened the Scarborough Evening News praised the theatre's 'astonishing decorative scheme' and went on to say, 'there is nothing that embodies to such an extent the most modern features of moving picture theatre design'. The cinema complex presents an imposing image sited in a prime seafront location against a backdrop of cliffs. Internally, the large auditorium survives virtually intact, characterised by strong, streamlined forms and a tour de force circle supported on twelve slender columns, reputed to be the largest in the country when first built. The fan-shaped plan form and monumental scale are directly influenced by Robert Atkinson's design for the Brighton Regent (1921). Unusually, the auditorium sits parallel to the façade of the building, owing to the awkwardness of the site which is bounded by cliffs at the rear. The remains of an innovative early central vacuum cleaning system can also still be seen, along with the original trunked air ventilation system. Alterations were undertaken to the building, mostly during the 1960s, which included enlarging the stage, replacing the 1920s light fittings in the auditorium, constructing a fly tower, cladding the front facade of the theatre in buff coloured panels, and inserting dropped ceilings and a row of upper boxes to the rear of the circle in the auditorium. However, many of these later additions are fully reversible, (particularly the dropped ceilings and external cladding) and their removal would reveal the fine original ceilings and striking Italianate Carraraware facade, featuring a portico in antis with pedimented window, that exist beneath.

Historically the *Futurist* is of great local and national value and emblematic of an important and arguably under represented period of British social history. Its story epitomises the development of British seaside entertainment from its humble beginnings on the sands of Victorian holiday resorts to the pleasure palaces of the modern age. The theatre holds an unbroken record as a leading performance venue and over the decades has showcased the best in show business talent in addition to being home to the national television phenomenon *the Black and White Minstrel Show*. Thus, the *Futurist* should not be viewed simply in isolation but in the context of its association with an unrivalled entertainment legacy spanning 116 years.

Comparators

Only a handful of comparable early super-cinemas from the post 1918 era survive and most are listed. These include the *Coronation Cinema*, Manor Park, East London (1921), *The Elite*, Nottingham (1921), the *Leeds Majestic Theatre* (1922), the *Whiteladies Picture House*, Bristol (1921), the *Pavilion*, Shepherds Bush (1923), the *Abbeydale Picture House*, Sheffield (1920) and *New Gallery*, London (1925). Many contemporaries of the *Futurist* such as *The Brighton Regent* (1921), *Dalston Picture House*, North London (1920) the *Capital*, Cardiff (1921) and the *Piccadilly* Manchester (1922), have now been demolished. Other existing listed cinemas of a similar age have been discounted due to their significantly smaller size (the *Curzon Cinema*, Clevedon, Somerset, 1920 and the *Pavilion Cinema*, Hailsham, 1921) or incomparable design (*Winding Wheel Picture House*, Chesterfield, 1923, designed in a half timbered, tudor revival style).

Coronation Cinema, Manor Park, East London (1921)

Unlike the purpose-built *Futurist*, the *Coronation Cinema* was enlarged from an earlier pre-war cinema to a design by architect Clifford A Aish. It has an impressive auditorium in a flamboyant baroque style but has a smaller capacity than the *Futurist* at 1,904 seats (the seating capacity of the *Futurist* is 2,400). It is Grade II listed and now operates as a banqueting hall.

The Elite, Nottingham (1921)

The Elite was designed by Adamson & Kinns and is Grade II* listed. The ornate facade and exterior side walls treated in white glazed tiling remain intact. Internally, however, the cinema has been heavily subdivided and gutted for retail use.

Leeds Majestic Theatre (1922)

Our records show the *Leeds Majestic Theatre* as having been built in 1922, not 1921 as was suggested in the latest English Heritage listing report. This is crucial as it places the *Futurist* at a comparable size but an earlier date. Designed by architects Pascal J. Stienlet and J.C. Maxwell, the Greek Revival style facade is reminiscent of that of the *Futurist*. It has been converted into a nightclub and is Grade II listed.

The Whiteladies Picture House, Bristol (1921)

The Whiteladies Picture House has a smaller seating capacity than the *Futurist* at 1411 seats. Like the *Futurist* it was modernised internally in 1959. Externally it has a much less imposing facade of limestone ashlar and render and incorporates a mid nineteenth-century terraced house. It is Grade II listed.

The Shepherd's Bush Pavilion, London (1923)

A purposely built cinema designed by Frank T Verity in the Italian Renaissance style the *Pavilion* is an imposing structure of brick and stone. The building has lain in a disused state since 2001. Planning permission has recently been granted for it to become a 220-bedroom hotel. Under the proposed scheme, the existing facade will be protected. The cinema is Grade II listed.

Abbeydale Picture House, Sheffield (1920)

The *Abbeydale Picture House* was designed by architects Dixon and Steinlet of North Shields. Built in a similar neo-classical style to the *Futurist*, it features a domed tower above the main entrance and is strikingly clad in white faience tiles. However, sited on an inner city main road, its setting is much less dramatic and it is also significantly smaller than the *Futurist* with seating for 1,560 people. It is Grade II Listed.

New Gallery, Regent Street, London (1925)

Originally conceived as an art gallery in 1888, *New Gallery* was converted to a cinema in 1913 and enlarged in 1925 to incorporate an increased capacity of 1,450 seats. Although converted to a Habitat Furnishings Store in 2006, most of the original cinema decoration designed in the Greek Revival style has been retained and restored. It is Grade II Listed.

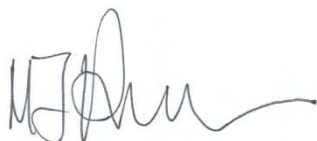
Conclusion

The relatively small number of listed comparators demonstrates the *Futurist's* rarity value as an early 'pre-talkies' era super-cinema, with the earliest surviving use of clear sightlines to the screen from all seats and the largest circle of its day. 'Pre-talkies' super-cinemas are a building type unique to the short period of time which spanned the end of the First World War (1918) to the mid-twenties when cinema design changed with the introduction of sound. As such, the *Futurist* is a rare survivor and well worthy of retention. It is well preserved and compares favourably to other listed theatres of a similar date. It is actually more complete than some and in our opinion, meets the special considerations for selecting buildings of culture and entertainment for designation contained within the English Heritage Selection Guide. Furthermore, it is one of the last remaining buildings designed by the renowned but arguably underrated theatre architect Frank Tugwell and has strong historical value and associations with the nationally significant entertainers *Catlin's Favourite Pierrots* and *The Black and White Minstrel Show*. The Theatres Trust is therefore happy to recommend the statutory listing of this early super-cinema.

The campaign for the statutory listing of the *Futurist Theatre* has, to date, been led by the local community, for the benefit of the local community; a true exemplar of the 'Big Society' in action. We highly commend all their work and trust that their views will be taken into account in the final decision making process.

I hope this information will assist in considering this theatre for statutory listing. Should you need any further information or clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me at the above address.

Yours sincerely,



Mark J Price
Planning and Heritage Adviser

Sources

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Fig. i



Fig. ii

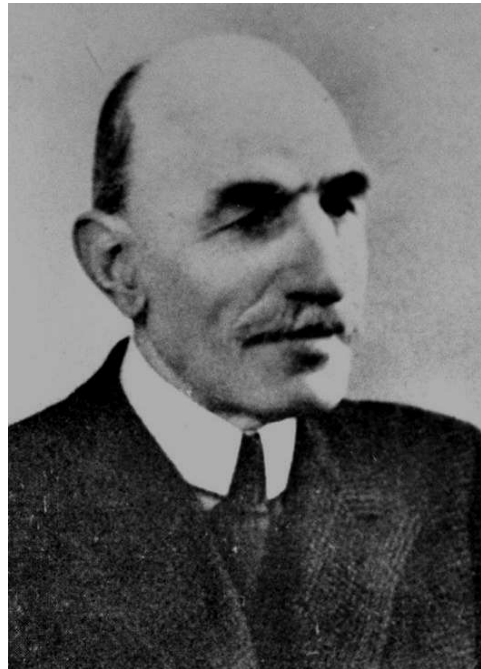


Fig. iii

Fig. i Catlin's Royal Pierrots
Fig. ii Pierrot show, South Bay Sands, Scarborough
Fig. iii Frank Tugwell



Fig.iv



Fig.v



Fig. vi

Fig.iv The Beatles at the Futurist, 1964
Fig.v. Robert Luff with members of the dance troupe in the Black and White Minstrels television show
Fig.vi NatWest Headquarters formally the National Provincial Bank (1932), London by Sir Edwin Cooper