

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1363

28 January 2021

Planning Service
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Sardis House
Sardis Road
Pontypridd
CF37 1DU

By e-mail: PlanningServices@rctcbc.gov.uk

Application: 20/1011/20

Site: FORMER CASTLE BINGO CLUB (INCLUDING ANGHARAD'S BAR) AND ASSOCIATED GROUND FLOOR AND UPPER FLOOR COMMERCIAL UNITS (NOS. 74/85) HIGH STREET, PONTYPRIDD, CF37 1QN

Proposal: Demolition of former bingo hall and associated attached premises. (This is not a planning application. It is an application for Conservation Area Consent and as it is the Council's own application it will be decided by the Welsh Ministers).

Remit:

Theatres Trust is the National Advisory Body for Theatres and was established by The Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres'. The Trust is a statutory consultee in the planning system and local planning authorities in Wales are required to consult the Trust on planning applications for '*development involving any land on which there is a theatre*', '*residential development within 50 metres of a theatre*' as well as for proposed theatres. The definition of theatres within the Act defines a theatre as 'any building or part of a building constructed wholly or mainly for the public performance of plays', and therefore applies to theatres, playhouses, arts centres, ciné-varieties or buildings converted for theatre use, old and new, in other uses or disused.

Comment:

This application for Conservation Area Consent has come to the attention of the Trust because it is seeking demolition of the former Castle Bingo Club which occupies the former Royal Clarence Theatre, later becoming known as New Theatre and the County Cinema following internal renovation.

The Royal Clarence was built in 1890 originally as a dedicated theatre before presenting a mixed programme of live performance and cinema from the early 1900s. Works to facilitate greater cinema use prior to World War II gave the building Art Deco character internally but retained the decorative triangular front element. Cinema continued until the early 1980s when it converted to

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Chair Tim Eyles Director Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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bingo use. The bingo club closed around twenty years later and the building has been vacant since that time.

The building occupies a prominent triangular site adjacent to Pontypridd's railway station on the High Street which effectively acts as a gateway into the town centre. It is in a deteriorating condition given the prolonged period of vacancy and we can appreciate why the Council is seeking to optimise use of this key site and considering future options. However, loss of any theatre building is regrettable and we would always seek this to be a last resort after other options for retention have been exhausted, particularly return to performance use or other use compatible with the building's character, form and significance.

In this case we consider it unlikely for there to be need and demand for the site for live performance use and we consider it a greater priority for plans for the Muni to be progressed to provide that function. The Muni was formerly on the Trust's Theatres at Risk register and we recently wrote in support of initial plans consulted on by the Council. Although there is no cinema directly in the town, it is probable that need is met by the Showcase around five miles away.

Whilst externally the building is showing some signs of neglect, we would question the relative merits of demolition resulting in potentially holding a vacant site for a prolonged period compared to retention and possible future adaption for other purposes. As an example, the Grade II listed Palace in Swansea is being repurposed for flexible employment and enterprise space. Although this building contains many blank and utilitarian features this is not uncommon with cinema and theatre architecture, but the front triangular section is more decorative and we would be particularly keen to see this element retained if possible. We would not necessarily agree with the Heritage Appraisal that the building is of low aesthetic value. The units at street level afford an opportunity to activate the High Street, and could potentially be utilised as low-cost units for start-ups at least in the interim until the Council has drawn up definitive plans for the site's future.

Internally images suggest the building may not be in as bad a condition as may be expected, but this is not definitive and the Heritage Appraisal does not cover this aspect. We would highlight, following comments in paragraph 7.3.1 of that document, that the presence of historic and significant features concealed behind later additions and insertions is common. If demolition is to be permitted, there should be a full programme of recording.

In conclusion we do not necessarily object to the longer-term demolition or loss of this building but are concerned about its demolition now and the impact this would have on the character, integrity and significance of the conservation area in the absence of formal proposals for replacement. As set out we consider there are potentially other options available utilising the existing building in the longer term, but certainly also in the interim.

On that basis we could support the granting of conservation area consent for demolition but would urge this not to be carried out immediately and for consideration of other options to be

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made. We would however urge insertion of a recording condition so that future generations will have access to information on this cultural and historic asset for the town and the people who used it.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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