

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/2043

22 March 2023

Planning and Place  
Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea  
Kensington Town Hall  
Hornton Street  
London  
W8 7NX

By e-mail: [planning@rbkc.gov.uk](mailto:planning@rbkc.gov.uk)

**Application:** PP/23/00589 & LB/23/00590

**Site:** 291 Westbourne Grove and 113 Portobello Road, LONDON, W11

**Proposal:** Use of 291 Westbourne Grove as a chamber music and performance venue with education and multi-purpose space for flexible community use, practice rooms, ancillary offices and cafe/bar. Extension and alteration comprising demolition and replacement of infill roofs linking No 291 Westbourne Grove to theatre block. Removal of one roof pitch, provision of acoustic plant enclosure to south block (back buildings). Lift overrun and new roof to eastern (WC) block. Alterations to 291 Westbourne Grove and 113 Portobello Road shopfronts. Replacement fenestration to No 113. Replacement of roof lights to north roof (yellow room). Overhaul, refurbishment and insulation to all roofs. Reinstatement of two high-level window units to main auditorium. Enlargement of external door and replacement external doors. Removal of shutters to south block (back buildings). Excavation and lowering of ground floor at theatre block, WC block and partially at 113 Portobello Road. Repair and refurbishment of building and improved environmental performance of building envelope. Installation of front of house stair and lift. Alterations to secondary part of theatre building. Provision of secondary glazing to windows and 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'.

## Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at the Grade II listed Twentieth Century Theatre, which is currently vacant and before that had been in alternative use. They seek change of use back to a performance venue

## 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

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with education and community provision along with various internal and external alterations to facilitate this. We were engaged by the applicant at pre-application stage and undertook a site visit in December 2022.

There has been a theatre at this site since 1863. It was named the Bijou Theatre in 1866 and underwent substantial refurbishment in 1893. It consisted of a 'Grand Hall' on the upper level with an adjoining foyer/refreshment room described as being "luxuriously appointed". Below was a large supper room with capacity for three hundred diners. This is also described as being, "elaborately fitted up, as well as being prettily decorated". The Bijou Theatre became a cinema in 1911 until the end of the First World War and returned to live theatre use in 1925 under the ownership of the Lena Ashwell Players. It was at this point renamed the Century Theatre. Lena Ashwell had been a notable actress, theatre manager and producer who was awarded an OBE for her work performing and organising entertainment for troops on the front line. The Players group was based on her troop entertainment programme and presented plays with minimal scenery and props. In the early days the group included Laurence Olivier who made his stage debut at the theatre. From 1929 it became an established venue for amateur productions, and a final name change to Twentieth Century Theatre came in 1936 under the ownership of the Anthroposophical Society pending completion of their Rudolph Steiner Hall in Marylebone. The theatre then became only occasionally used by amateur groups until the 1960s when it was purchased for use as an antiques warehouse with a market in the former supper room. The Grand Hall was made available for private hire, functions and exhibitions and this lasted until 2016. The building has been closed since that time.

The Twentieth Century Theatre is a Grade II listed heritage asset on account of its auditorium being a rare surviving hall of its type with gallery across one end. The main hall remains quite intact, with the foyer/refreshment room and entrance foyer to Westbourne Grove as well as upper rooms within both the Westbourne Grove and Portobello Road sections also containing surviving historic features, fabric and plan form. The theatre also has cultural significance through hosting the stage debut of Laurence Olivier, the British debut of the Oscar Wilde play Salome, and in its early years readings by Charles Dickens.

Given this significance we are keen to see the building returned to active use. Paragraph 202 of the NPPF (2021) seeks development proposals to secure optimum viable use for designated heritage assets. We therefore welcome the ambition and investment of the Aspect Foundation to invest in and restore this asset. The original use was that of a theatre within the main hall supported by ancillary foyer and function space and back of house facilities. This proposal can be considered to be very close to that principle, utilising it in a manner quite consistent with its original function. Therefore this likely constitutes the optimum viable use.

As an older building, and as is common with many other historic theatres, the Twentieth Century Theatre does not provide the standards of accessibility or facilities required by modern users and regulations. For example, there are a number of level changes meaning there is no wheelchair access to much of the building including the main auditorium, upper foyer and the former dining hall/proposed lower studio space. There is a lack of WCs, back of house provision is inadequate,

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and it is likely additional acoustic measures would be required to protect the amenity of surrounding properties. It is therefore inevitable that the applicant would seek to undertake change to address these issues. In principle, subject to loss of important and historic fabric and character being minimised or fully justified through delivery of appropriate benefit, this is something we could support to enable the proposed use to be viable and sustainable and importantly to arrest prolonged vacancy and further deterioration.

The proposed plans will provide two main entrances utilising both the Westbourne Grove and Portobello Road blocks. The former would more directly serve the Main Hall for most audience members, which is on the first floor, and the latter would open into a proposed ground floor café which can function as an all-day venue. Through internal alteration including removal of stairs and ramping there would be full accessibility across the ground floor and lift access to the first floor. The former dining hall on the ground floor would become a studio/rehearsal space capable of hosting smaller-scale performances with flexible audience formats, its volume increased through excavation below ground and functionality achieved through removal of existing columns which obstruct. The Main Hall will be again utilised as the main auditorium in its current flat-floor format with removable seating providing an audience capacity of around 180. The programme would predominantly consist of chamber music but this space could also handle other types of performances, functions and educational activities. The adjoining former refreshment room will provide front of house bar/foyer space or additional break-out/function space. At the upper levels to Westbourne Grove there will be small rehearsal/practice rooms.

These plans will see extensive areas of alteration and removal of fabric throughout the building.

Within the Westbourne Grove entrance hall there is currently a historic staircase and decorative floor tiling. This will be significantly altered with excavation to the floor level to provide the necessary level access, and removal and replacement of the staircase to meet modern standards. Whilst this constitutes substantial harm and it is regretful to lose decorative features and plan form, with reference to paragraph 202 of the NPPF we consider this to be acceptable and sufficiently mitigated in light of the clear and substantial public benefits of enabling optimal viable use of the asset through ensuring it is usable and fully accessible. Without ramping there would be no level access into the venue, and the optimal standard for inclusivity is for all audiences and users to be able to enter through the same means. With the staircase, in addition to it being made wider, less steep and therefore safer for access and egress, it will also help rationalise movement between the main hall and rehearsal rooms within the Westbourne Grove block. The impact of these alterations can be reduced through reinstatement or replication of existing appearance and materials as far as possible.

Similarly within the former dining hall there would be further excavation, removal of existing columns and removal of areas of internal walls and other rooms. Whilst this area has previously been unsympathetically altered the original plan form can still be read. This can also be considered to constitute substantial harm, however again we contend that this is acceptable because part of the change to layout facilitates lift access to the upper level. If this were to be placed elsewhere it would likely cause greater harm and loss elsewhere; to the main hall the

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proposed location appears to be the optimum one. Moreover additional volume will be required to enable this to function effectively as a performance space, and likely also to allow for the insertion of acoustic protection necessary not just to preserve the amenity of neighbouring properties but also to avoid bleed into the main hall. Whilst we acknowledge that in policy terms excavation is discouraged, the creation of additional space through a void underneath this area will also help provide the services, heating and ventilation necessary for the venue to meet current standards.

To the first floor there are two primary areas with significant change; the area between the auditorium and foyer which contains WCs and the backstage area. The former will see an altered layout which will use the space more effectively with additional WCs including an accessible WC, and is the landing point for the new lift. This is supported, as increasing the number of WCs will help better align with modern standards for places of entertainment and reduce queueing and congestion during busy periods such as intervals. In turn this should facilitate increased audience spend which may further support viability.

The backstage area behind the main hall would again see loss of original plan form, however this area is currently convoluted and inefficient with a series of small spaces and level changes. The alterations will enable a back of house lift not just making the venue accessible for performers but also substantially assisting the efficient delivery and removal of sets and equipment and providing for a safer environment for performers. It will also provide for an accessible WC and shower, although there is only one dressing room available. Operationally the applicant will need to consider how and where others can be provided elsewhere in the building and how this is managed, particularly if both performance spaces are in use. Otherwise it will limit the range of shows they could receive, and certainly separate dressing rooms would be needed for reasons of safeguarding should children and young people be performing. Nonetheless, consider these alterations necessary and that they deliver enough benefit to justify harm.

There is significant loss and alteration proposed to the main hall's stage. Currently this is not accessible, whereas the proposals will allow for step-free access to back of house and a platform lift from the auditorium. The stage is raked, which is not favoured by modern producers or particularly for the purposes of orchestral use which will form the dominant programme. Again whilst regretful to see alteration of historic form, rakes have been removed for similar reasons at other theatres where they still exist including more recently at the Dominion in London's West End. We can support this due to the need to ensure the venue can function, although we would urge that existing boards are re-used as the applicant has suggested.

Across the building there will be a number of smaller-scale interventions. For example, historic windows, tiling and glazing will be restored. However there are also a number of examples of doors being removed and replaced as well as other works to make the venue functional and development acceptable such as enabling ventilation and soundproofing. In some cases removals may be for reasons of meeting current fire and safety standards, however we would strongly encourage replacements to replicate original appearance. Otherwise whilst individual harm may be negligible or less-than-substantial, cumulatively there is much greater impact. In

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some instances we suggest there would be merit in further reviewing and refining replacements.

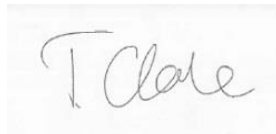
In terms of overall layout we had submitted some recommendations to the applicant in our pre-application comments. Some points for suggested amendment remain, however we appreciate that addressing them may not be possible due to constraints and impacts on other areas. These matters are not significant enough so as to affect our overall recommendations. We also noted need to ensure sufficient acoustic protection both internally and to nearby sensitive receptors and we welcome submission of further information within the acoustic report which appears to confirm that noise levels would achieve required standards.

Overall we welcome these plans, and consider that for the most part they would sensitively bring the Twentieth Century Theatre back to active use compatible with its original function. Paragraph 15 of Planning Practice Guidance on the historic environment (2019) is clear that where there are a range of potentially viable uses the optimal viable use is 'the one likely to cause the least harm to the significance of the asset'. The proposed use is the likely optimum viable use. Whilst these proposals do generate substantial harm and loss to fabric and plan form in some areas, on balance we consider this necessary to enable a return to performance use and justifiable due to the benefits generated. This must further be considered in the context that other potential uses for the site would also likely require alterations which could be even more harmful, and that ongoing vacancy should be avoided.

The return to use of the Twentieth Century Theatre, particularly given the core offer of the applicant, will further contribute to the strength and diversity of London's renowned cultural provision and improve access locally.

We are supportive of the granting of planning permission, and for the corresponding listed building consent are similarly supportive in principle should the applicant further review and minimise cumulative harm arising from more minor alterations, or better articulate why re-use or replication cannot be possible.

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



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National Planning Adviser

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