

Protecting theatres
for **everyone**



Ref.: TC/1387

14 April 2023

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

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

Application: 23/0250/08 & 23/0251/12

Site: MUNICIPAL BUILDING, GELLIWASTAD ROAD, PONTYPRIDD, CF37 2DP

Proposal: Conservation and repair of the building, including refurbishment of the Auditorium, remodelling of the Entrance Foyer, Bar and Mezzanine, installation of new passenger lifts, WCs, Dressing Rooms, Changing Place, erection of a bin store and associated improvements to back of house areas

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.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

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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

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:

These applications for planning permission and listed building consent have been brought to the attention of the Trust. They seek various alterations and refurbishments at the Muni Arts Centre. We have not been directly notified despite these proposals falling within our statutory remit outlined above. We have been engaged by the applicant at pre-application stage.

The Muni is a former Wesleyan chapel which was built at the end of the nineteenth century in gothic style and is Grade II listed. After it ceased to be used as a church it became a municipal hall and from 1980 an arts centre when it was given its current name. Although a valued and beneficial use as an arts, cultural and social facility for the town and its surrounding catchment, as a converted chapel it had a number of limitations in its function and some interventions were not necessarily sensitive to its historic significance. Our database entry for the Muni references its backstage being unsuitable for those needing level access and performers needing to cross the stage to reach dressing rooms. Along with a theatre, comedy and live music programme it also hosted wider functions such as exhibitions. In 2014 the Muni closed and was added to the Trust's UK-wide Theatres at Risk register but was removed again in 2015 after it was taken on by a new operator. However it again closed in 2018.

We are keen to see the Muni return to use and for theatre and performance provision in Pontypridd to be reinstated. Therefore we welcome the Council's efforts to invest in the Muni to see it refurbished and reopened with previous deficiencies addressed, and that a reputable operator has been appointed.

In terms of front of house provision, the proposed scheme results in an uplift in WC provision with a more rational layout particularly at the ground floor. Furthermore an accessible WC and a Changing Places facility will be provided. This is achieved through reorganisation of the existing café area to the ground floor with relocation of the kitchen and removal of a series of store rooms, the box office and an office. As a result there can be new openings directly into the café/bar which has the benefit of enabling this to be used as an all-day venue and opened independently should the rest of the Muni not be required for use. The secondary auditorium bar is being converted to a multi-use room with moveable bars. This will offer greater flexibility, and enhance the Muni's range of facilities.

Relocating the existing bar/servery slightly further along will create space for a lift to the first floor, which again is supported because it will also make that level accessible. It is to be assumed that wheelchair positions can be provided on the

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balcony, which would accord with best practice, although these are not indicated on the proposed plan. We suggest the applicant gives thought to this. A second lift back of house will also make the dressing rooms to the first and second floors accessible, and an accessible WC and shower is also provided at each level. Ideally there would also be an accessible dressing room and a WC at stage level, but we recognise there are building constraints restricting this. Overall however this represents a significant improvement in accessibility and inclusivity for performers and staff.

A further new larger opening (and infilling of an existing entry) behind the stage and external ramp will improve get-in arrangements which currently are compromised. There will also be improved landscaping and planting. It appears that externally there will be digital display screens which it is to be assumed will act as show signage and advertisements, helping to improve visibility and prominence of the Muni and its events.

To conclude, we are supportive of these plans and the improvements to the function and accessibility of the Muni they will bring. We consider that by enabling the Muni's return to active use and supporting its ongoing sustainability this support the asset's ongoing conservation. We also consider that the proposed interventions are sensitive to its historic significance, but that in any case they generate substantial public benefits through making the venue more inclusive and enhancing the cultural and social well-being of local people.

We therefore recommend the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

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

Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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