

Ref.: TC/2342

17 October 2024

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Planning and Economic Development
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By e-mail: consultations@east-ayrshire.gov.uk;

Application: 24/0426/PP & 24/0428/LB

Site: The Palace Theatre 9 Green Street Kilmarnock East Ayrshire KA1 3BN

Proposals: Part demolition, erection of front foyer extension, rear extension, and fly tower, external alterations to include stone repair, replacement and refurbishment of windows and doors, re-opening of windows, roof repairs and associated works.

Remit:

The 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

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Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Jon Morgan

Trustees Vicky Browning OBE, Anna Collins, James Dacre, Suba Das, Liam Evans-Ford, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Tracy Ann Oberman, Lucy Osborne, Saratha Rajeswaran, Truda Spruyt, Michèle Taylor MBE, Katie Town

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Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at the Palace Theatre. They seek to undertake various internal and external alterations and repairs including construction of extensions to the foyer and back of house.

The Palace is Category A listed. It was built originally in 1863 using red sandstone in an Italianate style as a Corn Exchange and featured a tall clock tower to the centre of its front elevation to commemorate the recently deceased Prince Albert funded by a public subscription. The Corn Exchange contained shops, a public library and a reading room. It was always intended to host performances and for that purpose there was a main hall with a capacity of around 1,200 people. The building was extended in 1886 and converted to a music hall in 1903. In the 1930s it was renamed the Palace Picture House and became exclusively a cinema but despite installation of a state-of-the-art sound system it closed in 1949 as there was too much competition from newer cinemas built in the town. Two years later the Council brought it back to use as a theatre called the Exchange Theatre. A major fire in 1979 closed the venue for three years and it didn't fully reopen until 1985. The Palace Theatre is an important arts and cultural asset for Kilmarnock and its surrounding catchment, providing a mixed programme. The complex includes the main Palace theatre space alongside the larger Grand Hall and a smaller hall called the Pillar Room.

The theatre is currently closed pending the refurbishment and improvement programme covered by this application.

Whilst in a central and accessible location, the theatre has become severed from the rest of the town centre by the A735 and B7073. There is a pedestrian link to the Burns Mall shopping centre opposite via an underpass. This does not necessarily provide the best sense of arrival or entice people to visit the theatre outside of performance times. This is further compounded by the Palace being to some extent understated; it is clearly a striking building and an important contributor to local townscape and character within the town but it is not identifiable as a theatre. The site also has constraints due to Kilmarnock Water wrapping around the building to the east and south. For its size and range of spaces there is limited front of house space, and accessibility is sub-optimal with separate entrance and no lift access to upper levels.

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We therefore welcome efforts to invest in and improve this important theatre and heritage asset. The Design & Access Statement sets out various options for development which have been considered. The plans brought forward will address current challenges, as well as develop the theatre and its wider offer to make it more of a destination with a broader arts, cultural and social function. These plans are complemented by wider highway and public realm improvements which will support better connectivity with the rest of the town centre.

Removal and infilling of the underpass affords availability of additional space to the front of the Palace which is being utilised to add a front of house extension wrapping around the building. This will provide a single and accessible point of entry and enable provision of an all-day café/bar. This will help entice greater visitors who can then engage with the theatre and its offer and support the venue's financial sustainability through generating additional income to support its programme. It will also enhance the audience experience. We consider the design, form and materials of the extension to be sensitive to the building's character and significance. Installation of illuminated 'Palace' lettering above will increase visibility and prominence and draw people to the venue. It will also help signify the Palace as a place of entertainment, with such signage along with show advertising being recognisable features of the design and character of theatres and other performance venues.

Within this scheme will be lift access making upper levels accessible for the first time. A Changing Places facility has also been included. This will optimise the inclusivity, role and social value of the Palace. Alterations to existing circulation and back of house administrative spaces south of the clock tower will facilitate conversion to an additional smaller performance space/studio anticipated to function as a flexible youth theatre. This further enhances the cultural offer for Kilmarnock.

To the rear are less sensitive later interventions utilising render and metal cladding, and operationally these present constraints on the theatre's programme due to level changes and insufficient accessibility. These extensions will be replaced by a single structure as an extension to the original building. This will provide an improved stage and service access, replacement workshop, refurbished dressing rooms with some en-suite facilities, and lift access making upper levels accessible for performers and staff. Again we consider this extension to be of appropriate design and represents an improvement on current structures. It will provide for greater efficiency of get-ins and

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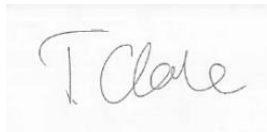
get-outs for shows which will improve the venue's attractiveness to promoters and will enable it to host a broader range of shows.

Significantly, there will be development of a fly tower above the stage house to the theatre. The purpose of this is to provide better theatrical capabilities which along with better back of house and servicing provision will enable and attract further productions. Whilst this will interrupt historic fabric and introduce a second taller element, its location within the site means the clock tower to the front would remain as the dominant feature when read from the primary approach routes to the Palace. However its harm is mitigated by the significant public benefits arising from enhancements to programme, flexibility and function which ultimately will help sustain the operation of the Palace and the building's conservation into the future.

There will also be various general internal and external refurbishments and repairs, and this is supported.

This is a wide-ranging and ambitious project which has identified challenges and deficiencies with the existing theatre and wider complex, and is addressing them through sensitive development and extension of this significant heritage asset. We are supportive of the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you wish to discuss these comments in further detail.



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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