

Theatres fit for the **future**



Ref.: TC/3432

17 April 2025

Christian Barton
Planning Service
Development Management
Town Hall
King William Street
Blackburn
BB1 7DY

By e-mail: planning@blackburn.gov.uk

Application: 10/25/0295

Site: Darwen Library Theatre Knott Street Blackburn BB3 5BU

Proposal: Refurbishment of the Library Theatre to create a new entrance, with lift and stair core and erection of 2 storey extension to create additional accommodation and bar area

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'.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Joshua McTaggart

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

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund supports the work of The Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697

Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on this application for planning permission at Darwen Library Theatre. It seeks to construct an extension to the theatre to enhance and expand its facilities, as well as undertake a wider programme of refurbishment.

Darwen Library Theatre was built in 1908 as both a library and a theatre. It is a Grade II listed heritage asset on account of its architectural interest as a striking and well-designed civic building, for the high quality of its fixtures and fittings, for its layout as a library and for being a good example of a Carnegie library. For many decades the theatre element was utilised for a wide range of events and functions and was a valuable resource for local groups. In the late 1990s works were undertaken to convert the lower level to a separate dedicated theatre with a capacity of just over 200 seats. The theatre's programme is varied and includes professional touring shows along with some productions by local groups. It is an important community venue. Paragraph 98 of the NPPF seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities such as this.

We welcome that investment is being made into this theatre. The project has a number of objectives, namely to improve the theatre's prominence and make it more welcoming as a destination outside of performance times, to expand its front of house provision to provide an all-day offer which also complements the library offer and integration with the theatre, to improve connectivity and the relationship between the two uses, and to generally improve the building and its function and flexibility.

Additionally there is a placemaking objective of improving the connection between the building and the core town centre, and the link between the town centre and the railway station. We recently commented on and supported a related application seeking removal of a redundant outbuilding to facilitate improved access and integration with the town centre.

The current floorplans and images within the Design & Access Statement demonstrates this challenge. The theatre's main entrance is concealed to the rear of the site accessed through a small car park. The only internal connection between the library and theatre is a small spiral staircase towards the rear of the building. There is no lift and whilst internal accessibility is generally reasonable there is scope for further improvement. Some of the facilities look dated and would benefit from refurbishment to meet the expectations of modern audiences.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Joshua McTaggart

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

The proposed plans will see the addition of a two storey extension to the south-west of the building which will provide a new street-level entrance with better visibility from School Street. This will contain a reception desk at ground floor level with a small bar/servery to the rear. There will be a lift and a large set of stairs rising up to the library above. At upper level the extension is laid out with some tables (assumed to be café seating). Within the existing building, what is currently the theatre bar will become a secondary performance/rehearsal space. There will be some layout alterations, for example an additional accessible WC will be provided. Similarly there will be some layout changes to the library; the function of that sits outside of our remit but in general terms we are supportive of enhancing its range of community functions given its relationship with the theatre below and that both uses can complement each other.

We consider that the proposed plans for this building will significantly improve its function and operation and will go a long way towards meeting the project's objectives. However, we also believe there is scope to go further to even better integrate the theatre, library and front of house offer to provide more of a single unified venue in a similar manner to the Storyhouse in Chester, Beam in Hertford (cinema and theatre) and other recent development proposals including the Brindley in Runcorn.

The bar space within the new extension has limited functionality, for example there is no kitchen serving it which would give more flexibility and wider offer and there is no obvious storage space. It is quite isolated from the main functions within the library, and not visible from within that area. It would be beneficial for it to be fully understood what food and beverage offer is anticipated/desirable and whether these proposals would deliver that. We suggest there could be an option of having a more central café within the library perhaps utilising the existing timber check-in desk to give more of a focal point. Some thought will need to be given to controlling temperature and providing suitable working conditions as the welcome desk is directly in line with the opening doors.

The overall strategy of accessing and securing the building might need some further thought. Whilst there are advantages in maintaining a means of entrance from the car park into the new rehearsal space particularly if it were to be used independently of the main auditorium whilst shows are taking place, it creates an additional area to control and manage access to. Utilising the extension as the primary point of access would be recommended.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Joshua McTaggart

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

The lobby between the rehearsal space and the theatre is also a sound and light lock and is a route between back of house and front of house. This looks to be a pinchpoint liable to congestion. We suggest pulling this back into the rehearsal room footprint to allow greater space. The accessible WC for the theatre also opens out at this point and would benefit from more space in front of it for queuing and avoiding congestion with people coming out of the auditorium. The accessible WC could likewise move further back into the rehearsal space. Also linked to this would be a review of the location of the stairs to stage right and again, possibly relocating from the wing and into the side stage area.

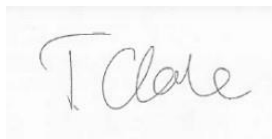
Whilst we recognise the need in heritage terms for the extension to be subservient to the original building the step-back creates some challenges with optimising visibility, particularly as it is also obscured from the south-west by the large supermarket sign. Consideration may need to be given to having a sensitive but effective signage strategy.

We welcome and support improved energy efficiency and insulation.

Whilst we have provided a number of comments to help ensure this project is sustainable, viable and cost-effective into the longer term, we do nonetheless welcome this project.

We can support the granting of planning permission.

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



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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

Facebook @theatres.trust **Instagram** @TheatresTrust

Chair Dave Moutrey OBE

Director Joshua McTaggart

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

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund supports the work of The Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697