

Theatres fit for the **future**



Ref.: TC/379

4 December 2024

Tom Bradfield
Reading Borough Council
Civic Offices
Bridge Street
Reading
RG1 2LU

By e-mail: plgadmin@reading.gov.uk

Application: PL/24/1392

Site: THE HEXAGON, QUEENS WALK, READING, RG1 7UA

Proposal: Application under s.73 - Variation of condition 2 (approved plans) of planning permission PL/24/0063 for Demolition of some of the existing back of house areas and erection of an extension of the existing Hexagon Theatre to provide a new studio auditorium, flexible rehearsal space, community studio with workshop space and back of house space, along with improved public realm by providing a new podium connection between the new proposed extension and Queen's Walk, along with other 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'.

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 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

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 to vary the approved plans for redevelopment at the Hexagon. This follows changes being made to the scheme to ensure it can be delivered within budget.

The main alterations compared to the previous scheme include the loss of the upper level of the extension, revised internal layouts and some external changes such as removal of PV panels to the roof and simplifying the podium bridge following reduced load to a pedestrian footbridge.

Externally the extension is of similar design but has been set back reflecting the reduction in massing and floorspace. We consider the Hexagon to be a significant theatre of its time and a non-designated heritage asset (our application for statutory listing was turned down) and do not consider this development will diminish that significance or readability of the original building.

At ground floor level the extension broadly functions in the same way as originally envisaged but with layout changes and rationalisation. For example, the quantum of WCs and showers remains the same but they occupy a smaller footprint. The back of house lift has been lost although the front of house lift now serves this level; it will need to be considered how entry this will be controlled to prevent members of the public accessing ground floor back of house areas when the flexible space is not in public use. However, loss of the back of house lift means that wheelchair users and others with reduced mobility must use the scenery lift to move between back of house at ground and first floor. Whilst provision of an accessible WC and shower at both dressing rooms levels is welcomed, at ground floor it is not optimally located having been moved from close to the dressing rooms/flexible space to the corner of the extension. This may require public users of the flexible space to move through back of house areas. The position of the scenery lift is better than previously as it will enable sets/equipment to be pushed directly in rather than making a turn as before.

At first floor level the footprint of the new studio theatre is reduced, with an indicative capacity of thirty less seats. It also appears that the stage area also has less depth. In principle we do not have any objection to this, assuming it meets the operator's needs and programming aspirations, as it still provides Reading with a substantial new theatre space. There are substantial changes to other front of house areas at this level. Whereas previously the upper foyer and rehearsal room were separate, these have now been merged. This will reduce flexibility as the studio theatre and

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 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

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

rehearsal room cannot be used simultaneously as there would otherwise be limited foyer space for audiences. Again it should be ensured this is acceptable operationally as it will reduce capacity to accept external bookings and also potentially reduce opportunities for income generation. As at ground floor level the WCs have been relocated but offer the same number of facilities within reduced space. A baby changing facility is retained but proposals for a Changing Places facility has not been taken forward which is regretful. If there is an opportunity to reinstate such a facility this would be welcomed.

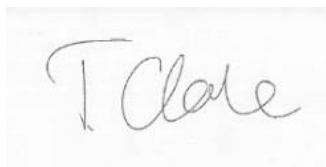
The reduction in scale of these proposals has had a particular impact on back of house facilities. There is now no green room to serve the studio theatre. There is a separation of dressing rooms requiring performers to cross over the stage or across front of house to get between them, which is not ideal.

The loss of the second floor level means there is now no additional community studio as was offered in the original scheme, and neither will there be an upper external terrace. There is however capacity for some external seating at first floor level on the pedestrian footbridge.

The Hexagon is an important cultural asset for Reading. Whilst regretful that the scheme has had to be reduced in scope and offer, it will still enhance provision and deliver a new performance space. We have raised some matters for further consideration but these can be addressed or mitigated subsequently.

We remain supportive of this project, and can similarly support the granting of permission.

Please continue to engage with Theatres Trust should plans be subsequently revised.



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 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

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