
From: Peter Wylde [REDACTED]
Sent: 12 April 2024 16:58
To: Planning
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: The Former Saville Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue: Applications 2024/0993/P and 2024/1005/L

For the attention of Alex Kresovic, Planning Solutions Team

As the national Cinema Theatre Association, we wish to strongly object to these new proposals for the former theatre and current Odeon cinema. Please ensure your determination takes full account of these points.

Remit

The Cinema Theatre Association (CTA) is the national body for the study and preservation of historic cinema buildings. This is our website:

[Cinema Theatre Association \(cinema-theatre.org.uk\)](http://cinema-theatre.org.uk)

Brief History of the Saville

The Saville theatre opened on the 8th October 1931. Opinions differ regarding the impresario promoter: Historic England's listing description says it was A.E. Fournier. Although designed as a theatre with a full stage and 16 dressing rooms, the Saville also included projection facilities for film.

The theatre was designed by Sir Thomas Bennett of T.P. Bennett & Sons in association with the theatre architect Bertie Crewe. The main feature of its fine exterior is a superb bas-relief frieze by the sculptor Gilbert Bayes. Measuring 129 feet long, this depicts 'Drama Through the Ages'. The Saville was listed at Grade II in June 1998, List Entry 1271631.

It ran as a successful theatre until 1965 when it was leased by the Beatles' manager Brian Epstein, who staged a mixture of live theatre and rock and pop concerts, helped by its proximity to music shops and studios in Denmark Street.

Epstein relinquished the Saville in 1967, and in 1970 it was bought by EMI and converted to an ABC cinema. The interior was drastically altered to provide 2 screens. In 2000 it was acquired by Odeon, and further subdivided in 2001 to create the four-screen cinema that operates today.

Comments on the Applications

The scheme is very well described in the eight-part Design & Access Statement. For the CTA there are three main issues:

Overall Height and Bulk of Development

Pages 44 to 47 of Part 5 describe the efforts by the architects SPPARC to fit two different functions into the very tight site of the Saville: a circus/theatre, and a 200-bed hotel. None of the options are good.

The consequence is a huge 5-storey block to be perched on top of the historic theatre. Its proposed appearance is shown in Part 6. The diagram on page 59 shows that the scheme would be a totally new structure within the original external walls. Elevations are on pages 60-61, while page 63 shows the impact on Shaftesbury Avenue.

No amount of design ingenuity can hide the fact that the scheme would double the bulk of the historic theatre.

Circus/Theatre Provision

This circus or theatre space would be completely underground, with the ground floor level given over to a foyer. Plans for the circus/theatre are shown on pages 80 to 82 of Part 8, with interior visuals on page 84.

Page 86 shows different possible configurations for the theatre, but it looks as though structural alterations would be needed to achieve these. The form proposed to be built is basically an oval, suitable for a circus rather than a theatre.

No quantity of seats is given, but from the visual, the space appears relatively small.

Restoration of Historic Arched Entrance

The original design of the exterior is shown in Part 3, pages 22 to 23. Particularly important was the very fine bronze decorative window within the entrance arch. Sadly this was simplified at some point to the current design shown on page 24.

The scheme aims to partly restore this, to the design shown in Part 6, page 60. But in such a major development, there should be funds to restore fully its original detail.

Objections by the CTA

The CTA therefore strongly objects to this proposal on several grounds:

1. The scheme would build a massive and over-bearing 5 or 6 storey structure that would tower over neighbouring streets and completely undermine the architectural quality of the fine, listed, 1931 theatre.
2. The scheme would have a severely detrimental effect on Shaftesbury Avenue, would reduce daylight, and would turn the Avenue into a canyon of tall buildings.
3. The theatre provision in the basement is a circus rather than a theatre, and would not achieve the objective of adding a new, viable theatre to London's West End. This relatively small gain does not justify the enormous development above.
4. The scheme should restore and reinstate the elaborate window in the entrance arch facing Shaftesbury Avenue to its full original appearance.

We therefore urge Camden Council to refuse this intrusive and damaging proposal. Please inform us of the result, and consult the CTA on any further schemes or submissions.

Very best regards,

Peter Wylde

CTA Architectural Caseworker

