

FAO:

**Address: Odeon/ Former Saville Theatre, 135-149 Shaftesbury Avenue, London, WC2H 8AH**

**Application Ref: 2024/1005/L**

**Proposal:** Part demolition, restoration and refurbishment of the existing Grade II listed building, roof extension, and excavation of basement space, to provide a theatre at lower levels, with ancillary restaurant / bar space (Sui Generis) at ground floor level; and hotel (Class C1) at upper levels; provision of ancillary cycle parking, servicing and rooftop plant, and other associated works.

**Statutory Remit:** Historic Buildings & Places (HB&P) is a consultee for Listed Building Consent applications, as per the *Arrangements for handling heritage applications – notification to Historic England and National Amenity Societies and the Secretary of State (England) Direction 2021*. We are concerned with historic assets of all types and all ages, including conservation areas and undesignated heritage.

**Comments:** HB&P have recently been alerted to the above application for listed building consent. HB&P remind Council of its duty to notify the National Amenity Societies.

The Odeon/ former Saville Theatre is a grade II listed heritage asset that is bounded by two conservation areas – the Seven Dials Conservation Area to the south and the Denmark Street Conservation Area to the north. It was constructed in 1930-31 as part of an interwar theatre boom that revived the West End's Theatreland at a time when cinema was rapidly expanding. The architectural form and style reflects elements of Modernism and Art Deco. The long front elevation is particularly grand and imposing with the somewhat austere solid brick and decorative elements emphasising the horizontal proportions of the building that is so reminiscent of Art Deco architecture.

The main elevation is largely unaltered from the original 1930s design. A rusticated stone plinth sits beneath a highly decorative frieze by Gilbert Bayes depicting 'Drama through the Ages'. Bayes was a successful and celebrated sculptor who produced several works for prominent buildings. The frieze is considered to be one of the largest and most important works of public sculpture of its time, according to Historic England's list description. The original theatre use ceased in the 1960s, after which it was used as a live music venue and later a cinema, but it has been in continual entertainment use to the present day.

Permission was refused in 2019 for the comprehensive redevelopment of the theatre as a hotel with cinemas in the basement and the addition of a two-storey roof extension and terrace (2017/7051/P & 2018/0037/L). The refusal was subsequently upheld at appeal in 2021 (APP/X5210/W/19/3243781). The reasons for refusal were mainly due to land use, harm to the listed building, and the design.

The current scheme comprises a six-storey roof extension plus plant level, and an extended four storey basement. The body of the theatre and the rear wall will be entirely demolished and with new floor plates introduced to create a hotel with approximately 200 rooms. The ground floor will be reconfigured as the front of house space for both the theatre and the hotel. A new auditorium and support spaces will be created within an extended basement.

HB&P do not object to the principle of reinstating a live performance use and recognise the benefit of introducing other complementary uses that would help make a performance venue viable. We also welcome the repairs and restoration of the principal elevation. However, HB&P strongly **object** to the scheme that is proposed. Page 23 of the Design and Access Statement correctly states that '... the Saville Theatre is more than a mere edifice...' and it is therefore unfortunate that the document then presents a proposal that completely guts the building and rear elevation, leaving a mere shell of the original listed building, dominated by incongruous rooftop addition.

The long proportions of the building, together with the horizontal parapet, mean there is scope for the addition of a well-designed roof top extension which, if sympathetically executed, could be incorporated without significant harm to the listed building. However, it must be subservient to the host heritage asset and respect its proportions, materiality, and design aesthetic. This scheme does not do that. Nor does it respect the predominantly low rise character of the two conservation areas.

The height and massing of the proposed extension is completely out of scale and fails to respect the scale and character of the existing building. The design is overly busy and the very vertical emphasis of the fluted façade is at odds with solidity and horizontal proportions of the historic form below. It also more than doubles the height of the overall structure, resulting in a poor relationship between the old and the new. The visual dominance of the extension harms also its presence within the streetscape and the ability to appreciate the architectural qualities of the historic theatre.

The extent of demolition, and thus the loss of historic building fabric, is also a concern and impacts of the integrity of the building as a whole. The rear elevation is more utilitarian, but not of any less significance, and reflects the back of house functions of a theatre, as opposed to the grand, public facing elevations that typify theatre design of the time. Adequate justification has not been provided for this extent of demolition.

The interiors may have been modernised, but they do utilise the same space and the original structure and it's likely that original decoration remains behind the more modern cladding used to box in the individual auditoria. Further, the new performance space would be largely within a new basement excavation rather than within the existing auditorium area, effectively removing the historic use out of the building. It also means the internal configuration would no longer relate to the historic external design.

Overall, this is a very poorly considered scheme in terms of the impacts of the historic environment and the harm to the architectural and historic integrity of this grade II listed building. The scale and massing of the extension overwhelms and dominates the host building, resulting in a poor relationship between the old and the new, and the loss of historic building fabric is substantial. The application fails to meet the local and national policy and statutory requirements regarding the historic environment and should be refused.

**Policy:** Chapter 16 of the NPPF (2023) manages change within the historic environment. Para. 200 of the NPPF (2023) requires that “When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation”. And at Para 206: “Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification.”

London Plan Policy D3 seeks to ensure that development optimises site capacity; is of an appropriate form and scale; responds to local character; achieves the highest standards of architecture, sustainability and inclusive design; enhances the public realm; provides for green infrastructure; and respects the historic environment. Policy HC1(C) on heritage conservation and growth reinforces the requirement that new development proposals should be sympathetic to the significance of heritage assets and to avoid causing harm.

Section 16 (2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires that, in considering whether to grant listed building consent for any works the local planning authority shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

**Recommendation:** Refusal on heritage grounds.

Regards

Ross Anthony