OSBORNES CHARTERED ARCHITECTS

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AMBASSADORS THEATRE

DESIGN ACCESS & HERITAGE STATEMENT

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1. This Design, Access & Heritage Statement has been prepared by Osbornes Chartered Architects on behalf of the ATG Entertainment, to support the applications for the Planning and Listed building consent in relation to works to repair roof and various other areas inside the Ambassadors Theatre.

2.0 PREVIOUS PLANNING HISTORY

2.1. Considering the age of the building numerous planning and listed building consent applications have been made in relation to the building, the following table therefore notes the most recent approved planning applications associated with the theatre.

Planning ref.	Description	Date
2024/5072/L	Creation of hospitality lounge and bar space in existing staff offices on second floor of Ambassadors Theatre.	22-11-2024
2024/2682/P	Erection of a timber single storey structure with service hatch and entrance ramp on the pavement on Tower Court to provide seating and bar area in association with the theatre use for a temporary period of 1 year.	24-07-2024
23/3062/A	Display of a two-sided neon illuminated sign with 'Ambassadors' text, incorporated within a new vertical oriented triangular metal frame affixed to the building's West Street elevation above the existing canopy	12-09-2023
2023/3040/L	Installation of a new vertical oriented triangular metal frame incorporating a two-sided neon illuminated sign with 'Ambassadors' text, to West Street elevation above the existing canopy	11-09-2023
2023/1415/L	Alterations to entrance door threshold facing Tower Court with new matching marble central infill sloped to provide level access.	03-05-2023
2023/1423/L 2023/0992/P	Various internal and external alterations comprising waterproofing and strengthening works at Stage and Sub-Stage level to Boiler Room, Prep Room and front West Street passage.	04-04-2023
2022/5141/L	Waterproofing and strengthening works to stalls-level bar and accessible WC; repairs to lantern roof including replacement of delaminated slates and installation of waterproof membrane and timber battens to north-east and north-west roof pitches.	04-01-2023
2022/3599/L 2022/3105/P	External and internal alterations including installation of plant deck at roof level and associated plant equipment and various repair work and redecoration, repairs to internal fabric, alterations and refurbishment of seating, installation of lift, upgrading of building services, new lighting and speakers, alterations to the bar and other internal decorations.	02-09-2022
2004/3028/L	Installation of internal fire alarm system.	20-08-2004
L9601655R1	Internal alterations involving the erection of a temporary stage over the stalls area, temporary modification of the circle seating arrangements and temporary lighting	21-06-1996
8701962	Installation of new air conditioning system	23-06-1987

3.0 THE SITE & THEATRE

3.1. The Ambassador's Theatre is located along West St in the Covent Garden area. It is sited at the conner at the Junction between West St and Tower St. The site is in the South edge of the Seven Dials Conservation Area.

3.2. The Seven Dials Conservation area is an important historic area in the city with a unique legacy and contains building with various architectural styles, types and uses. There is no particular period or style to the buildings, however their combination contributes to the character of the area.

3.3. In the local vicinity of the site consists of several other theatre buildings constructed in the early 20th Century, of which the Ambassadors theatre is one. Others include St Martins Theatre and the Cambridge Theatre.

3.4. The Ambassadors Theatre was officially listed on 16th March 1973 and has the following listing information.

Official List Entry
Heritage Category: Listed Building
Grade: II
List Entry Number: 1379185
Date first listed: 16-Mar-1973
Date of most recent amendment: 09-Jun-2017
List Entry Name: Ambassadors Theatre
Statutory Address 1: Ambassadors Theatre, West Street, London, WC2H 9ND

Location
Statutory Address: Ambassadors Theatre, West Street, London, WC2H 9ND
The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.
County: Greater London Authority
District: Camden (London Borough)
Parish: Non Civil Parish
National Grid Reference: TQ3000781007

Summary
Theatre, opened in January 1913, designed by W G R Sprague in Classical style with Louis XVI style interiors. The builder was Kingerlee and Sons. The Stalls were re-seated in 1924 and the Circle in 1929 by Sprague and Barton.

Reasons for Designation
*Ambassadors Theatre is listed at Grade II for the following principal reasons: * Architectural interest: as an 1913 theatre designed by W G R Sprague, one of the most important late C19 and early C20 theatre architects; * Completeness of design: both the Classical style exterior and the interior in Louis XVI style were designed by Sprague and include foyer, circle bar, auditorium and some original backstage features; * Degree of survival: both exterior and interior are little altered; * Historical interest: the theatre saw the West End debut of many famous artists including Ivor Novello, Hermione Gingold, Paul Robeson, Margaret Lockwood and Vivien Leigh and it was the original home of 'The Mousetrap', the world's longest running show; * Group*

value: adjoins St Martin's Theatre of 1916, also by Sprague (Grade II) and 24 West Street (Grade II).

History
The Ambassadors Theatre was designed by the theatre architect W G R Sprague (1865-1933) and opened on 5 June 1913. Sprague (1865-1933) was one of the three leading theatre architects of the period 1890-1914 and designed more than thirty theatres during his career, including eight in London's West End

A new theatre had been proposed for this site in 1898-9 but had been twice rejected because of the narrowness of the surrounding streets, particularly Tower Court. In 1912 Sprague applied on behalf of Herbert Jay to build 'a comparatively small theatre' for 506 seated patrons and 40 standing, mainly for amateur productions. He argued that although the streets were narrower than normally allowed for access to a theatre there would be access to the site on three sides if the narrow Tower Court, only 13 feet wide, was included. Permission was granted on condition that Tower Court was widened to 20 feet, which made a restricted site even smaller. The height of the theatre was restricted by Ancient Lights acquired by neighbouring properties.

Sprague's plans, which included the interior decorative scheme, date from April 1912. An additional floor of dressing rooms was added during construction and the theatre opened on 5 June 1913. The auditorium was described in contemporary accounts as in Louis XVI style with ambassadorial crests and a colour scheme of Parma violet, ivory and gold.

A sprinkler system was added in January 1914. The stalls seats were replaced in 1924 and the circle seats in 1929 by Sprague and Barton. Apart from re-decoration the auditorium remains virtually intact. The theatre can currently seat 408.

From the start it was used for professional performances, specialising in small ensemble pieces and also revues, which were pioneered here by Charles B Cochran in 1914, and ran through the Second World War. Performers who made their West End debut in plays here included Ivor Novello and Hermione Gingold (both 1921), Paul Robeson (1925), Margaret Lockwood (1934) and Vivien Leigh (1935). In 1952 'The Mousetrap' opened here and remained until 1974 when it transferred to St Martin's Theatre next door. The building was also in occasional cinema use.

Details
Theatre, opened in January 1913, designed by W G R Sprague in Classical style with Louis XVI style interiors. The builder was Kingerlee and Sons. The Stalls were re-seated in 1924 and the Circle in 1929 by Sprague and Barton.

MATERIALS: the frontage to West Street and the corner to Tower Court is stuccoed, the remainder of brick in English bond. There is a metal and glazed canopy to West Street and the corner with Tower Court. The roof is concealed by a parapet.

PLAN: a splayed almost triangular site with a circular foyer at the corner of West Street and Tower Court, a circular bar above and stairs leading off. The auditorium comprises stalls and circle, the proscenium arch is 24 feet 6 inches wide with a box each side, and the stage depth is 20 feet 6 inches. The stairs, offices and lavatories adjoin Tower Court. There are three storeys of dressing rooms behind the stage along Tower Street.

EXTERIOR: the West Street elevation is of three storeys and five bays with a balustraded parapet with ball finials and a deep moulded cornice. The central three bays are separated by pilasters and have deeply recessed flat-arched casement windows. The slightly advanced end

bays have channelled pilasters under segmental pediments, circular openings on the second floor and flat-arched casements to the first floor. The ground floor has a continuous metal and glazed canopy, deep moulded cornice and alternate mahogany double doors and casement windows. The curved corner between West Street and Tower Court has mahogany half-glazed doors and triple casement windows above flanked by pilasters. The stuccoed southern bay of the Tower Court elevation is identical to the southern bay on West Street.

The remainder of the Tower Court elevation is in brick and plainer, the southern end of three storeys and a semi-basement with three elliptical-headed windows, the central part of two storeys with two elliptical-headed windows and a tall opening for loading scenery, and the northern part of three storeys with two elliptical-headed casement windows and a narrow stage door.

The Tower Street elevation has a taller three storey southern bay with an elliptical-headed casement on each floor and a lower three storey and semi-basement section of four bays with elliptical-headed windows and an elliptical-headed fire door.

INTERIOR: the interior plaster decoration is in Louis XVI style. Public areas have mahogany doors. The circular foyer has pilasters below a decorative plastered ceiling. The circle bar above is similar. The auditorium has a circular high relief decorated plaster ceiling with central chandelier, a panelled border with roundels and a deep cove penetrated by arches springing from fluted Ionic pilasters. The richly framed and festooned roundels have coloured armorial decorations in the arch tympana. The Circle has a horseshoe-curved balcony front with panelled and festooned plasterwork decoration, and there is a narrower section raised up at the back with a smaller similar balcony. Its ceiling has large fielded panels. The Stalls side walls have oval decorations with festoons, containing looking glasses, but, according to an old photograph in the Metropolitan Archives, originally held paintings. The flat basket-arched proscenium arch is crowned by three armorial decorations, flanked by fluted Ionic pilasters and tall single splayed round-headed boxes with urn decoration above and closed balustrading below.

Original stage machinery includes two fly floors and the traditional system of hemp flying, although the ropes, flying bars and pulley blocks have been replaced. There is a timber gridiron for suspending scenery with a now rarely surviving but disused single drum and shaft mechanism.

Cultural Heritage

3.5. The Ambassador's Theatre has a rich history, which dates back to its initial opening on Thursday 5th June 1913 and was built and opened before the start of the First World War. The theatre was designed by the renowned theatre architect W.G.R Sprague and was built by Kingerlee and Sons of Oxford. The intention was to create a smaller more intimate theatre that seated less patrons than typical theatres in the area.

3.6. Although the Ambassador's theatre was a separate financial enterprise to the St Martins Theatre located on the opposite side of Tower Court, they both shared the same Architect. Both theatres were designed at roughly the same time, however the construction of St Martins Theatre was delayed due to the outbreak of the First World War until 1916. Both theatres share a similar classical architectural style, with rusticated stucco Pilasters and engaged columns on both their West Street facing elevations.

3.7. The Ambassador's theatre is, however, considerably shorter in height and smaller in scale the neighbouring St Martins Theatre. The lower height of the theatre was due to restrictions due to the presence of 'Ancient Lights' on the neighbouring buildings and the need to not interfere with these.

3.8. The theatre's opening production was Panthea by Monckton Hoffe, which then had only a limited run at the Theatre.

3.9. Other notable productions during the Theatre's history included The Mousetrap by Agatha Christie which started its run at the theatre in 1952 with Richard Attenborough and his wife as part of the original cast. The play ran until 1974 at the Ambassador's Theatre, after which the production moved to the neighbouring St Martin's Theatre, at which it continues to this day. The Mousetrap is known for being the longest running West End show.

3.10. Ownership of the theatre has changed though its history, with the Ambassador Theatre Group taking ownership of the Ambassador's Theatre in 1996 and renamed the theatre to The New Ambassadors. The theatre was sold again in 2007 to Stephen Waley Cohen, who also owned St Martin's Theatre. At this time the Theatre reverted back to its original name. This ownership continued until 2018 after which the Ambassador Theatre Group, now known as ATG Entertainments, bought the theatre back.

Architectural Features

3.11. As mentioned previously, the theatre is of a relatively small scale. The theatre is smaller than initially intended, due to both height restrictions imposed due to the, at the time of construction, presence of nearby 'ancient lights' on its neighbouring building. This meant that to achieve sufficient height in its auditorium areas, the stalls of the Ambassador's are set below ground level.

3.12. The restrictive site also meant that the footprint of the theatre was also smaller than initially intended, with the adjacent Tower Court being widened, when the theatre was constructed. This was due to concerns at the time that the neighbouring streets were too narrow to accommodate patrons entering the theatre.

3.13. The Era newspaper reported on the theatre's opening on 7th June 1913 and said the following:

'The general scheme of decoration is Louis XVI and the colour scheme of Parma violet ivory, and dull gold is a refreshing change to the warm colours usually selected in decorative schemes. The Auditorium is arranged with a commodious stalls area, behind which is a good roomy pit, and above this level is the dress circle, and forming part of the same tier is the family circle, or upper boxes, sufficiently raised to form another distinct circle.'

4.0 EXISTING CONDITION & PROPOSED WORKS

4.1 The proposed works include the structural repairs to a wall at roof level of the building.

4.2 A structural Conditions survey was carried out by MJ Consulting 18/09/2024. This survey identified a number of structural repairs that are required to the building.

4.3 One area of concern is in relation to the concrete filler joist sloping wall mentioned above. This wall is a concrete wall which contains steel filler joists within. These filler joists were exposed to determine their condition. It was evident that these steels were in varying degrees of disrepair.

Ref 1

Ref 2

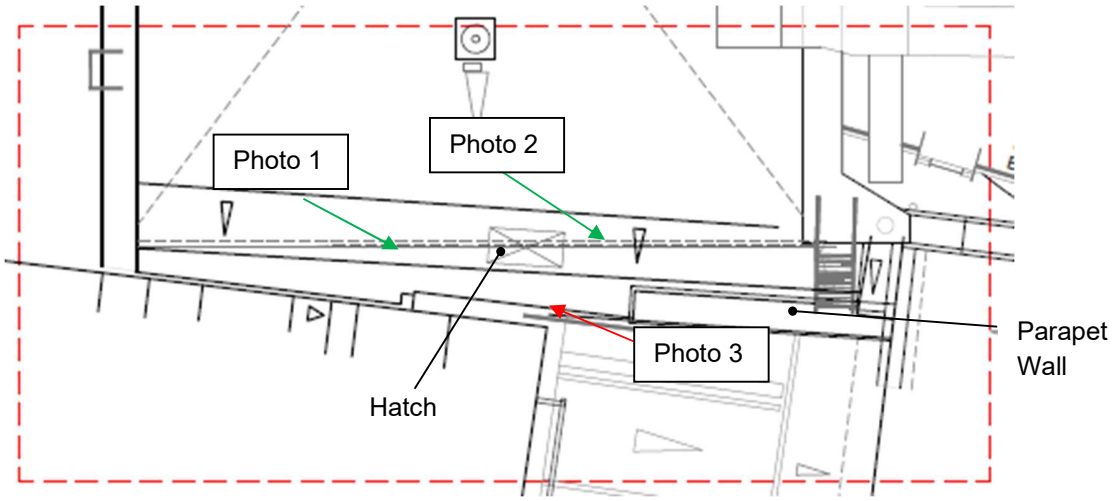
Ref 3

4.4 The issues with the steels include various levels of corrosion ranging from complete corrosion to light corrosion. Ref 1: Completely corroded. Ref 2: Heavily corroded. Ref 3: Lightly corroded. This has caused issues to the render finishes on this wall and has reduced the lateral stability of the wall under wind loads.

4.5 The gutter line appears to be just above the worst affected areas internally, which appears to be the more likely source of the water ingress.

4.6 The wall is of a sloping construction and appears to be covered with a felt bitumen sheet which is then dressed into the existing gutter. See photos on following page:

Existing Situation



Extract taken from drawing 24-127-SP1 A.

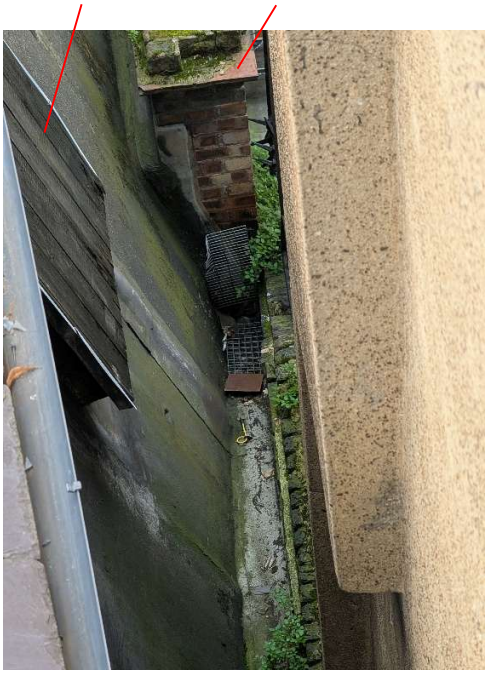


Photo 1
From above

Photo 2
From above

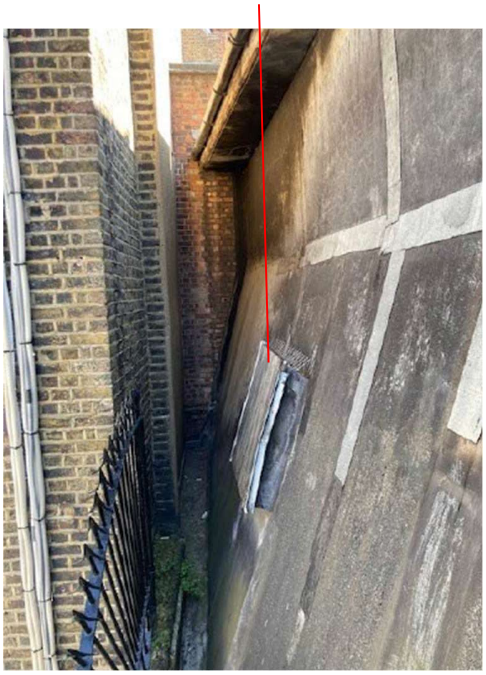


Photo 3

4.7 The existing situation is not ideal and where the bitumen felt has failed it has been taped up. The gutters are difficult to access and keep clear which results in vegetation build up and blockages.

4.8 There is potential for the issue to affect the neighbouring building if it isn't already.

JAN 2025

4.9 The proposal is to remove the existing sloping concrete wall and corroded steel reinforcement and replace with a new insulated, steel reinforced wall with a lead cladding.

4.10 The proposal is to look at improving the situation as far as possible within the constraints of the neighbouring buildings and access. This is going to be achieved in two ways as described below.

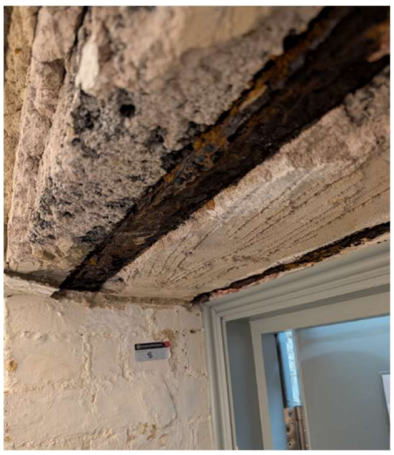
1. The approach to improving the detail adjacent to the neighbouring building is to construct a secondary lightweight wall off the existing structure and form a flat roof at a higher level just below the existing eaves as can be seen in Photo 3. This will return back at the same line as the end of the existing neighbouring building, to the newly constructed sloping wall. The lead will be dressed into the neighbouring building as indicated on the accompanying detail drawings. The sloping wall will not be replicated at this point and the vertical section of wall below the existing eave will be retained and supported with an internal steel proposed by the Structural Engineer. Internally this will be of benefit as the access on the gallery will be improved.
   See drawing 24-127 – S2 Section A-A

   From the point in line with the neighbouring building, as mentioned there will be a return which will be clad in lead and meet the rebuilt sloping wall. This will be constructed using new cranked steels, supported on a new internal beam also supporting the vertical wall below the existing eaves. The wall will be insulated and finished in lead cladding. The brick parapet will be built up to increase the height to form a gutter which will discharge into a box gutter formed at the start of the parapet wall which leads to an existing rainwater downpipe. The top of the parapet will be capped in lead, this will provide protection from the weather and any further vegetation growth.
   See drawing 24-127 – S2 Section C-C

2. The second approach to improving the situation is to use external materials which are not only more traditional than existing but have a longer life span and require less maintenance. This is quite an important consideration as accessing this area is difficult from a health and safety prospective.

4.11 In various locations the existing steel beams supporting the pavement lights around the venue, have corroded. These are located on the Sub Stage Plan & Basement / Stalls plan, submitted as part of this application. See drawing 24-127-GA2. It is proposed that the existing steels are carefully removed and replaced with new steels as detailed by the Structural Engineer.

4.12 Steel lintels over a door opening in the Sub Stage level have also been identified for further investigation. Once the steels are fully exposed an assessment can be made, as to whether they require replacement. If they require replacement, it is proposed that they will be replaced with reinforced concrete lintels.

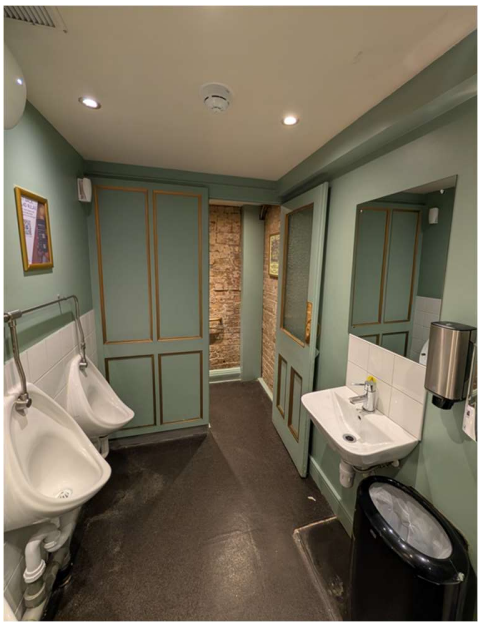


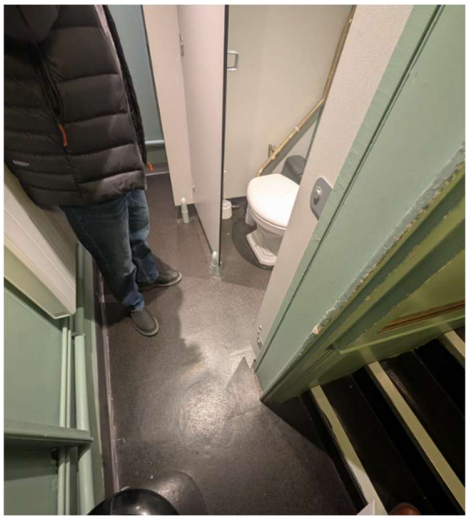
4.13 Steel filler joists within the Boiler room ceiling have corroded and require replacement.

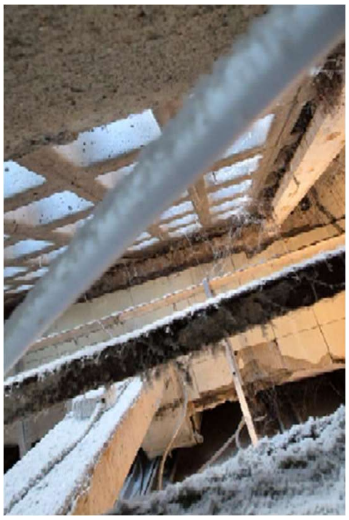
4.14 There are areas where the steels can not be assessed due to ceilings. The expectation is that these steels also need replacing due to the condition of the accessible steels. Once these steels are exposed for inspection, the Structural Engineer will confirm if they should be replaced or if they are in good enough condition to remain.

4.15 This application looks to seek permission to replace these steels if required.

4.16 In the Gents and Ladies W.C's on the Basement / Stalls level, the replacement of the steels to support the pavement lights, will require the removal of the existing suspended ceiling, which is relatively modern plasterboard. The opportunity will be taken to remove modern and damaged plasterboard to the W.C's area and refurbish. This will include stripping out all sanitary ware, cubicles and finishes, which are all deemed to be relatively modern and of no historic significance. The existing panelled partitions will be carefully removed for the steel replacement and then replaced back into their original position.







4.17 Damaged plaster in one area has exposed a beam in a store on the second floor. The steel beam appears to be in good condition. The repair is to remove the corroded steel mesh and damaged plaster and replaster which will help protect the beam from both fire and other elements.

5.0 HERITAGE IMPACT

Roof Works

5.1 The situation with the corroded steels requires action and cannot be left. Some intervention is required and as the existing materials cannot be retained to repair the problem, then the option of improving the situation should be considered.

5.2 Improvements will be made foremost to the structural stability of the roof area; there will be improvements in thermal efficiency; improvements to the water tightness of the external fabric and improvements to the ongoing maintenance of the building in a difficult to access area.

5.3 The heritage asset will be changed but it is considered a beneficial change which will improve the current situation of an out of sight area. It will stop further deterioration of the building which is also of benefit.

Other Internal Works

5.4 The situation with the corroded steels supporting the pavement lights, requires action and cannot be left. Some intervention is required and as the existing materials cannot be retained to repair the problem, then replacement is necessary.

5.5 New steel beams will replace the existing corroded steel beams. In one location if required concrete lintols will replace the existing steel lintols.

5.6 The ICOMOS Guidance suggests that the value of the heritage asset would be regarded as medium, with a minor change with the significance of impact as being slight.

5.7 In Summary

Roof Works

It has been identified that intervention is required to preserve the structural integrity of the building in this area. Existing materials will be lost due to the nature of the repair work, as total replacement of structure is required. With the loss of materials, there is opportunity to improve an awkward detail where the building abuts a neighbouring building. There is also opportunity to improve the thermal properties. Visually the impact to the building will be neutral / slight as it is in an area where it can not be easily seen from anywhere other than possibly a window in the building opposite on West St.

Other Works

It has been identified that intervention is required to preserve the structural integrity of the building in the various areas highlighted. Existing materials will be lost due to the nature of the repair work, as total replacement of structure is required. The work is essential as it could lead to a dangerous situation if any of the steels were to fail, which in turn could lead to the collapse of the pavement lights. This would pose a significant health and safety issue for the general public on the streets above as well as anyone within the theatre. Visually the impact will be within the building and within the back of house ‘service’ areas. It has been difficult to establish if the panels are original or a more modern replica, therefore the proposal is to carefully remove these for the work to be carried out and then replace them in the original location. This will ensure that if they are found to be original or of any significance then they have not been lost.

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