

Theatreland Lighting and Signage

An informal guide

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Contents

Introduction	3
Current policy context	4
Building types	4
Location and installation	5
Current poor quality lighting and signage	14
Contact us	15

Introduction

In conjunction with the theatre industry, the Society of London Theatre, the Theatres Trust and English Heritage, Westminster City Council has produced this guidance to support improvements to current theatre signage and lighting as part of the wider strategic aims of the adopted Theatreland Strategy. The strategy identifies lighting initiatives and streetscape schemes to both excite and improve the experience of visiting the theatre. The overall aim is to improve the long-term sustainability of the West End theatre industry.

The majority of theatre buildings in the West End are listed as being of architectural and historic interest, and most are within conservation areas. However, the council also recognises the importance of lighting and signage to the theatricality and vibrancy which epitomise the theatre going experience. Thus, a balance has to be struck between allowing the theatres to shine as exciting places to visit in London's Theatreland and respecting the architectural features of historic structures.

This guide sets out the council's policies on theatre signage and promotes an approach to lighting and signage, which respects theatre architecture, as well as allowing innovative interventions related to theatre productions, where appropriate.

This is an informal guidance note that will assist the theatre industry and the council's development planning services to work together to bring about improved lighting and signage installations. Although not formally adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document, it has been prepared in consultation with key stakeholders including English Heritage and the council will use this guidance when considering applications for theatre signage and lighting.

The guide will be used to inform planning applications until another guide has replaced it.



Theatreland by day



Theatreland at night

Current policy context

Current planning policy is set out in Westminster's Unitary Development Plan (UDP), adopted in 2007. Together with the emerging Local Development Framework (LDF), these set out planning policies for developing land, improving transport and protecting the environment in Westminster.

Of particular relevance to theatres are Policies DES 7 (townscape management), DES 8 (signs and advertisements), DES 9 (conservation areas) and DES 10 (listed buildings). Policy DES 8 is of particular relevance and two paragraphs in the supporting text (10.95 & 10.98) indicate that in special circumstances the normally very strict policies on advertising will be applied flexibly to theatres.

This paper therefore elaborates on how this can be done and identifies the scope and degree of flexibility that will be offered in considering applications for theatres.

Building types

The principal types of theatres can be loosely divided into three distinct groups, namely:

- the classically inspired buildings (the majority of theatres fall under this group)
- art deco theatres (a smaller number of theatres fall under this type)
- modern post World War II structures (a few theatres fall under this group which are generally not 'listed')

Applicants should identify how the introduction of new lighting and signage will both respect and enhance the architectural features of each building type. The style and detail of the buildings should inform the choice and location of lighting and signage in each of the types described above.

Location and installation

Signage and lighting: new opportunities

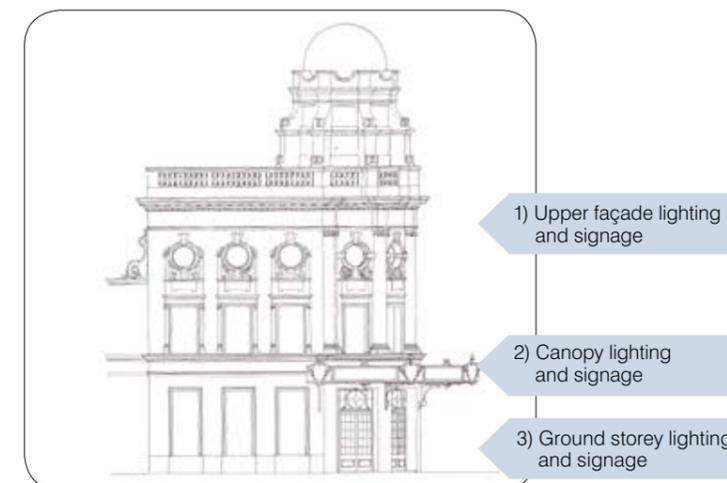
This guide seeks to encourage theatre owners and producers to accommodate architectural lighting alongside the introduction of more exciting and imaginative signage installations that will both respect and enhance the architectural features of their buildings.

The main initiatives in theatre lighting and signage promoted in this document are as follows:

- The use of appropriate locations below the canopy to house flat panel screens that display moving images
- In suitable locations above canopies and with approved units, the use of flat panels above the canopy that display static images
- The encouragement of three dimensional forms on top of the entrance canopies

Locations for theatre lighting and signage

Discussions with all those involved in or affected by theatre lighting and signage have helped to identify the parts of theatres frontages where signage or lighting is usually installed and the different types of theatre signage, as shown on the image opposite:



1) Upper façade lighting and signage

- Architectural lighting
- Theatre name signage
- Show boards and other three-dimensional features

2) Canopy lighting and signage

- Three-dimensional forms on canopies
- Hanging boards under canopies
- Lighting of and from canopies

3) Ground storey lighting and signage

- Pavement lighting
- Show advertisement
- Illumination of show advertisement
- Show images and critics' quotes

4) Opening nights of shows and special events

- Projected images onto facades
- Varied colour spotlights onto facades

The following section provides more detail on each of these types and locations for new signage and lighting.

1 Upper façade lighting and signage

Architectural lighting

Defining and highlighting the architectural elements of theatre frontages usually falls under the remit of theatre owners. Architectural lighting is an important way of promoting theatres and attracting visitors and patrons.

These illuminations should not contribute to light pollution by throwing light indiscriminately into the night sky. They should, however, emphasise the buildings' reveals, columns, cornices and other unique features.



Image 3 Architectural lighting



Theatre name signage

Theatre name signage

This occupies a small area of a theatre's façade in comparison with the show signage and imagery. On the classically derived buildings, it will often be on a frieze but on some corner buildings it may be arranged through individual letters, possibly internally lit or floodlit on a suitable solid armature or frame. It can also be incorporated into the entrance canopy.

The new opportunities in theatre name signage consist of encouraging theatre owners to strengthen the visibility of such signs by introducing more appropriate lettering units that respect the architectural style of the building.

Show boards and other three-dimensional features

Modern lighting techniques, using low voltage sources and discreet wiring, can extend the opportunity for lighting and lettering the building onto netted, permeable structures or signs in front of theatre façades. These should, however, be carefully fixed, so they do not permanently damage listed structures behind, and should preferably allow the building's details to be seen in the daytime. In suitable locations and with approved units, the use of flat panels on the building façades for the use of displaying static images may be accepted in place of show boards.

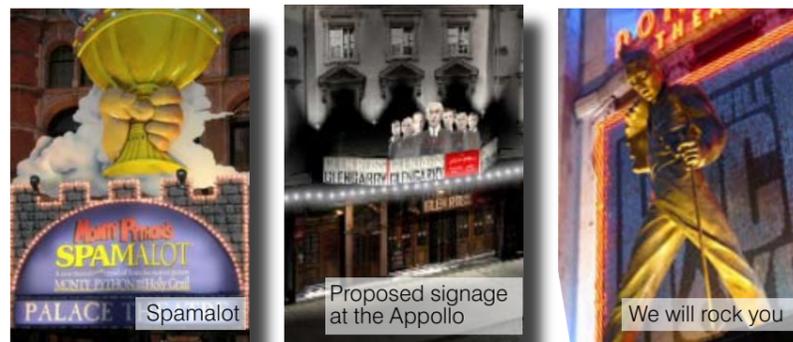
2 Canopy lighting and signage

Three-dimensional forms on canopies

Canopies of theatres may have a shorter life than the main building and many are replacements. On listed buildings, canopies may be of architectural and historic interest in their own right and these should generally be retained. Where canopies are not of interest, appropriately designed new canopies may be considered. During this period of replacement, structural strengthening can be carried out to support the suggested improvements to the lighting and signage on canopies described below.

Canopies by nature project out onto the street so can be used to support three dimensional light weight structures as an alternative to the traditionally used v-boards. There are many advantages in adopting this new form of three-dimensional show signage. Such benefits include the possibility of the structures acting as a place marker for the theatre from long views, as well as being visible from different angles. This will also allow for the building behind the signage to be fully visible. The structure can be a sculptural form, a cut out profile, or other form of three-dimensional devices such as light-boxes.

Examples of the use of these three-dimensional structures include the canopy of the Palace Theatre with the production of 'Spamalot', while the statue at the Dominion in Camden for the 'We Will Rock You' show is also another good example.



Playhouses work under different conditions, with smaller budgets available for show signage as turn around times are more frequent. The signage at the Noel Coward is an example of signage that can be used for different shows. This uses a panel which does not mask the elevation behind and is capable of taking a printed sign or being adaptable to flat screen technologies.



Some theatres have full porticos and no canopy structure and to introduce one would be visually disruptive and damaging to the architectural concept. In these instances, as with the Lyceum or the Theatre Royal Haymarket, banners can be positioned to hang within the spaces between the columns. The banners can be positioned between the columns, so these are clear of and do not obstruct the main façade. The example below highlights the form that this type of signage could take.

It is advisable that the number of banners used, are limited to the corners of the portico, and not the front elevations of the theatres. This is illustrated in the example of the Haymarket photo above.

Hanging boards under canopies

These boards have remained true to their traditional shape and appearance for many years, however with new developments in material types, internally illuminated signs and three-dimensional signage, there are now better prospects for replacing current hanging boards with 21st century replacements. They should always be of elegant and striking appearance.

Lighting of and from canopies

The current use of festoon lighting around the canopy edges could be replaced with other more innovative lighting units that could light both the canopy and the areas of the building above and below. Some canopy edges have coloured glass inserts which add colour and interest.

3 Ground storey lighting and signage

Pavement lighting

A welcoming glow of light directed downwards from the entrance canopy will make the front door to the theatre very legible. This can be supported by public realm improvements outside theatres. For example, in front of the theatres on Shaftesbury Avenue, improvements involve introducing a 'sparkly' doormat pavement finish using a quartzite granite material, which will reflect the under canopy lighting more strongly. For health and safety reasons it is not acceptable to project images on to the paving.

Show advertisement

Many ground floors have panels in blind openings that can take more information and where this is not possible, additional advertising can be arranged around doorways. Their design needs careful consideration, so it complements the architectural features, without masking or covering them. At this level they could be photographs, changing graphical displays or full motion video clips. For noise pollution reasons, it will not be acceptable to include sound as part of the presentation.

Though the appropriate use of flat panel technology will be encouraged, there may be some instances where theatres do not have appropriate locations for the introduction of such screens. In these instances, owners and producers should consider these constraints and assess the feasibility of the internal areas of the theatre housing such screens, as an alternative.



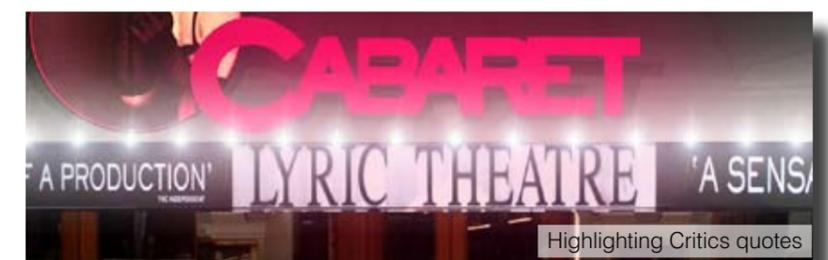
Illumination of show advertisement

Innovations in flat panel technology will enable screens to show images in light without the unnecessary bulk of old-fashioned light boxes being needed. This opportunity will be a powerful tool to attract passers by to stop and notice the show that is being promoted.

Show images and critics' quotes

Traditionally these were painted or sign written panels which were placed beneath the canopy. With the advancements in digital printing material these signs can now be simply and cheaply printed and sandwiched between transparent panels.

As proposed in the show advertisement section above, thin film technology is now encouraged, which will make it easier to change the cast images and critic's quotes as and when new shows begin production. Placing quotes and catchphrases related to the show in door reveals and around pilasters is also encouraged.



4 Opening nights of shows and special events

Projected images onto façades

Where a building face has sufficient flat area either on its primary wall or side wall, a projected image can be displayed from the building's own canopy. These have been used as special cosmetic improvements on public buildings but it is important to avoid excessive use. Full motion video above the first floor window could be distracting for drivers and will not therefore be accepted, but still images that could dissolve into another at suitable intervals will be encouraged before and after the opening night show. Any plans to use this type of projected signage on the theatre frontages should be discussed with the council's special events and planning officers in the first instance.



Varied colour spotlights onto façades

During the opening night of a new theatre show, a series of special coloured films could be placed in front of the existing white architectural lighting to increase the sense of excitement before the opening show begins. Lighting units, which could easily have coloured transparent films attached in front of them, will be able to change the appearance of the theatre façade for the opening night or special event.

It should be made clear that these specially permitted displays will only be allowed for a limited time.

Current poor quality lighting and Signage

It is the council's view that some of the current theatre lighting and signage is of poor quality and detracts from the character of certain streets and buildings. These should be removed whenever lighting and signage improvements are due to take place. Such elements include:

- Billboard or other panels that mask important architectural features
- Thick and crude light boxes
- Industrial looking floodlights on projecting stalks
- large scale banner advertising

Contact us

The installation of new signage and lighting on theatres will generally require permission. You should contact the planning department for further advice.

General planning information

To find out if a property is listed or in a conservation area and to obtain copies of design guidance or help with planning application forms.

Tel: (020) 7641 2513

Fax: (020) 7641 2515

Textphone/ Minicom (020) 7641 8000

E-mail: planninginformation@westminster.gov.uk

For an informal discussion about your lighting and signage proposals, please contact the relevant area team:

Central Team

Tel: 020 7641 2514

Email: centralplanningteam@westminster.gov.uk

South Team

Tel: 020 7641 2861

Email: southplanningteam@westminster.gov.uk

Or write to

Development planning services
Westminster City Hall
64 Victoria Street
London SW1E 6QP

Application forms

Application forms can be downloaded from the Westminster website at www.westminster.gov.uk

You can also create and submit most types of planning application online via the Planning Portal website at www.planningportal.gov.uk

Special Events application
westminster.gov.uk/specialevents

