



Historic England

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Our ref: PA00385725

13 October 2015

Dear Mr Miles

Pre-application Advice

AMBASSADORS THEATRE, WEST STREET, CAMDEN, WC2H 9ND

Thank you for enabling the London Advisory Committee to visit the Ambassadors Theatre and for the presentation on your proposals. The Committee considered the case at their meeting of the 24th September and I can now provide our pre-application advice, which incorporates their views.

Summary

The proposals involve the radical remodelling of the Grade II listed Ambassadors Theatre. As a result much of the original plan form and associated decoration will be lost. The complex and tight planning, noted as being of special interest will be removed. This means that in the terms of the NPPF there is substantial harm being caused to the listed building. Such harm should be exceptional and the Committee have advised that whilst they can see a case for wider public benefits arising from the proposals, there should be absolute clarity that these benefits will be secured in perpetuity. We would also like further information regarding the search for alternative premises to be as sure as possible that there is no reasonable alternative site that could deliver the same or similar benefits.

Advice

The Ambassador's Theatre was designed by W G Sprague and is one of a pair, the other being the adjacent St Martin's Theatre that together mark the end of the Victorian and Edwardian theatre building boom in London. Both theatres are listed at Grade II and are on West Street, either side of Tower Court which connects through to Tower Street. The Ambassador's opened in 1913 with St Martin's following three years later in 1916. The site is within the Seven Dials Conservation Area.

Albeit conceived together, the two theatres are different in scale and appearance ; they share a common language of materials but were designed for different owners. The height of the Ambassadors Theatre was restricted by ancient rights to light of



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adjoining buildings, but these were then demolished to allow for the construction of the St Martin's Theatre, which consequently could be much higher and more imposing in the street scene. The constraints affecting the construction of the Ambassadors resulted in a small scaled building of intimate character which seats 375 and is described in the Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatres as being a "striking feat of compression". The main auditorium, at basement level, is oval in plan incorporating the front sections of the stalls and circle under a fibrous plaster decorated dome supported on pilasters, which frame the arched bays of the walls containing decorative crests. To either side of the proscenium arch are very narrow boxes, now used for sound equipment. The proscenium opening is 7.45m wide by 6.25 deep and the height from stage to grid lighting is 10.25m.

The proposals involve the removal and relocation of the fibrous plaster dome, pilasters and crests into a new grand stalls bar in the basement which will replicate the relative proportions of the dome as seen from the front circle of the current auditorium. The current stage and proscenium are removed and a new performance space is set at ground level to allow for easier access for patrons, performers and production teams. The new performance space is designed to provide flexibility and be able to host a wide variety of non-proscenium theatre performances. New facilities to improve accessibility are provided in a side extension and set above the new auditorium is a rehearsal suite in a roof extension set back from the existing facades.

A decision maker is obliged by ss16,66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to:

a) have special regard to the desirability of preserving listed buildings and any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess; and

b) pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area

A decision maker should identify and assess the particular significance of the heritage assets affected by a proposal and take this into account to avoid or minimise conflict between the heritage assets' conservation and any aspect of the proposal (NPPF paragraph 129). Great weight should be given to the conservation of designated heritage assets and as heritage assets are irreplaceable any harm or loss should require clear and convincing justification (my emphasis) (NPPF paragraph 132) Where a proposed development would lead to substantial harm or total loss of significance it should be refused consent unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss (NPPF paragraph 133).



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The current building has remained largely unaltered since it was built but during that time audience requirements and expectations have dramatically changed. Particular issues include the the poor front of house facilities, especially for visitors with disabilities. The public areas in the current building are very small and cramped and are the smallest of any theatre in the West End. The WC provision is inadequate with no accessible or adapted facilities. The auditorium is 'side loaded' meaning that all the audience enter from one side space with two entry points, both being directly off staircases. The main auditorium has one of the worst examples of the "letter-box" effect providing poor sightlines for audience members in particular locations and the provision of contemporary and essential technical production equipment has affected the impact of the original interior design. However, despite all these issues the theatre is currently in use.

The aspiration of the project is to create London's first purpose-built West End transfer house for subsidised theatre productions, thereby guaranteeing programme opportunities of a further 8-16 week period for companies whose productions are currently only seen by a limited audience in at their resident theatre. The imperative for the design of the new auditorium is to support the transfer of these small scale producing theatres with the minimum of set design or directorial changes, minimising costs and increasing potential income for both actors, production staff and the wider subsidised theatre. As a receiving theatre it will host productions from a wide variety of venues not just in London, including the Donmar, the Almeida and the Royal Court, but also from across the country, including Sheffield Theatres and the Chichester Festival Theatre.

The applicants have examined the suitability of existing transfer space in the West End and found none currently suitable. Since the mid 1990's nine alternative sites have been explored by Sir Cameron Mackintosh, sponsor of the project, with a further two examined during the course of the development of the pre-application submission. The applicants case is that in strict commercial terms the investment required into a theatre of this size would not make a commercial return, but this project is a legacy that will be vested in the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation which will run the theatre as a receiving house and providing educational and employment benefits.

The circumstances of this case are in our view exceptional and include the range of the vision, the track record of the applicant and the potential to increase the resilience of the subsidised theatre, not just in London but across the country. However in order for it to be demonstrated that the substantial harm arising from the proposed remodelling is necessary to deliver these potentially exceptional public benefits, the consideration of alternative sites will have to be clear and convincing in order to make the case. It also has to be demonstrated that the public benefits of the proposal,



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including the provision of a West End transfer house dedicated to the subsidised theatre can be secured in perpetuity as far as practical and not, for example, negotiated away via legal agreement shortly after permission.

Next Steps

Thank you for involving us at the pre-application stage. We are broadly content with your proposals, subject to you addressing the issues as outlined above before any statutory approval is sought.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Barker

Planning and Conservation Director, London

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cc:

AMBASSADORS THEATRE, WEST STREET, CAMDEN, WC2H 9ND Pre-application Advice

List of information on which the above advice is based

Interior Remodelling Design Proposals by Citizens Design Bureau
Draft Statement of Significance of the Ambassadors Theatre March 2015 Montagu
Evans
Stage D Plans and elevations
Pre-Application Design Statement May 2015
Heritage Statement by John Earl



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