
THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY
The champion for Victorian and Edwardian architecture

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Your reference: 2016/4869/P & 2016/5032L
Our reference: 2016/12/021

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Dear Mr Glasgow

RE: Ambassadors Theatre (Grade II, WGR Sprague, 1913); demolition of listed building behind retained facade

Thank you for consulting the Victorian Society on this application, which was discussed by our Southern Buildings Committee at its most recent meeting. We wish to register our objection to the proposals and request that the local authority refers the application to the Secretary of State should consent be granted, as it goes against Local Plan policy.

William George Robert Sprague was a highly accomplished theatre architect, second only to his senior, Frank Matcham, in this field. Sprague designed almost all of the London's notable turn-of-the-century theatres alone, receiving the lion's share of commissions because he was so highly regarded. These differ considerably to the earlier Victorian theatres; Sprague preferring more architecturally correct forms, quite often in a delicate rococo style. The Ambassadors is one of Sprague's thirteen surviving theatres, out of the forty five or so that he built in the country. It was one of his last, and unusually came after the theatre building boom in London of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. It is often stated that the Ambassadors was designed as one of a pair along with St Martin's Theatre (1916), as Sprague's commissions in London commonly were. This is the not case; they had different patrons and are very different conceptions. The low height of the Ambassadors was indeed largely to protect the ancient light rights of the building on the plot that St Martin's now occupies. This is an interesting element of the theatre's significance in itself and makes an upward extension of a retained façade all the more undesirable.

There has been no thematic review of the West End's theatres since they were first listed; in the last thirty years most have been altered and much new information resulting from detailed research has been forthcoming. The interior of the Ambassadors was not even inspected when the building was added to the list. There is little understanding as to where the Ambassadors ranks both among listed West End theatres and in Sprague's oeuvre as well. Therefore, nobody currently has the knowledge as to how much of a loss to this important body of work the near total demolition of the Ambassadors would be, and this should have been the starting point.

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For the following reasons, we have submitted an application to the DCMS for the Ambassadors listing category to be upgraded to II* and we strongly feel that it merits this designation. Two other of Sprague's theatres are already in this category: the Lyceum in Sheffield (1897) and Wyndhams in London (1899), both on the grounds of their exemplary and relatively intact interiors. Whereas the latter in particular was something of a landmark in Sprague's career – his breakthrough – the Ambassadors should be seen as the pinnacle of it. In the words of the Theatres Trust Guide to British Theatres, it is a 'planning tour de force' and 'probably his most striking feat of compression'. As it is so unusually small for a West End theatre and Sprague packed it with his usual flair, the result is a particularly intense interior and one of his best. Many of Sprague's surviving theatres are under-listed, but the Ambassadors really stands out as the most distinct.

It is also one of the most intact and coherent of all the West End theatres, having undergone comparatively very few alterations because of its small size – it has escaped with only superficial redecorations. The surviving stage machinery of the Ambassadors has worryingly not been addressed at any point in the application material – perhaps because the listing description states that is no longer present. Yet, it features prominently twice in English Heritage's later publication 'Scene/Unseen: London's West End Theatres' (2003), as good examples. In short, it is one of very few theatres to still fly completely by hand and thus its functioning fly floor is a rare survival. Similarly, the wooden grid above the stage, with its traditional drum-and-shaft-lifting mechanism which is apparently still used, is most unusual. Stage machinery in historic theatres tends to have been motorized and thus the original mechanisms are either redundant or removed. We reiterate that the Ambassadors is quite possibly the most complete historic West End theatre and this would be a shocking loss.

Turning to the proposals, all are already in agreement that they would result in substantial harm to the heritage asset, which may well result in its subsequent de-listing. The Society was not aware of the proposals until we were consulted on the full planning application in December 2016. As it is such a controversial scheme, we are disappointed that the applicant did not engage us earlier, given that we are a statutory consultee for Listed Building Consent applications that entail the demolition, whole or in part, of heritage assets from the period 1837-1914. Other similarly relevant consultees were involved at the pre-application stage. Nevertheless, we have gone to lengths to understand the background of the proposals and our response is made on the assumption that they present public benefits that would be difficult to provide elsewhere in the West End.

We acknowledge that the Ambassadors has some shortcomings as a theatre venue in the twenty-first century, which are compounded by its small scale. It does however continue to function as a commercially viable West End auditorium. All period theatres suffer similar drawbacks and we do not consider that this should be a determining factor for this application to any extent. It is supposed that it would be too difficult to make reasonable improvements to the Ambassadors to make viewing conditions and circulation better, because it is so compact, but this has not been given any sort of exploration. Given that many ingenious ideas have been dreamt up to improve the deficiencies of historic theatres (of course never a perfect solution), it would be pertinent to see a scheme by an experienced theatre architect for the Ambassadors. Otherwise, it is just an assumption and not a material consideration. The applicant has based this assumption on advice received from the Theatre's Trust. Whilst we do not doubt their expertise in this area, we consider it relevant to point out their apparent conflict of interest. Several of the Trust's trustees work for the Cameron Mackintosh Group and the Mackintosh Foundation is a major funder.

The difficulty in delivering this project on a site that is not already in theatre use due to high land values is noted, though apparently it is not prohibitive. An existing theatre site in the West End is preferred for numerous reasons, though we are concerned that this would almost invariably result in the substantial demolition of a listed building if all

of the chosen criteria must be met. As seen above, we are not convinced that it should be the Ambassadors. A number of alternative sites have been ruled out for fairly irresolute reasons – for instance, sites that are too big – when it seems more realistic that the project could be delivered as part of a larger development. The Ambassadors may tick a lot of boxes, but they are not all essential to the success of the scheme; it is alarming to see that ‘an established theatre venue designed by WGR Sprague’ is one such criterion. It seems as though the Ambassadors has partly been chosen precisely because it is a listed building, which brings with it the prestige and familiarity of a well-designed Edwardian theatre. It is understood why this is an attractive site, but sacrificing some of the stipulated preferences would likely allow this project to go ahead without needlessly destroying the historic environment. Paragraph 133 of the NPPF, which should ultimately determine this application, states that consent should be refused ‘unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits’. We are not persuaded that the project cannot be delivered elsewhere and thus these are not quite the “exceptional” circumstances that paragraph 132 refers to.

As an application which would entail substantial harm to a Grade II listed building, the local authority’s default position is the refusal of consent. If it is believed that the circumstances really are exceptional, then this is exactly the sort of case that should be decided by a public inquiry. Furthermore, we recommend that a decision cannot be made until the outcome of the potential listing upgrade is known.

Yours sincerely,

Alex Bowring
Conservation Adviser

cc.
The Theatres Trust