
THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

The champion for Victorian and Edwardian architecture

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Your reference: 2017/7073/L
Our reference: 144974

15 May 2018

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Dear Mr Diver,

RE: The Shaftesbury Theatre, 210 Shaftesbury Avenue, London WC2H 8DP (Grade II, 1911, Bertie Crewe); refurbishment involving various internal and external alterations including internal demolition, basement extensions, creation of new entrance fronting Princes Circus, layout changes at all floors, replacement auditorium seating, installation of accessible lift, façade LED signage as well as internal, roof and façade repairs.

Thank you for notifying the Victorian Society of this application. The proposals were considered by our Southern Buildings Committee and I now write to offer their comments.

First, the proposed alterations to the façade, especially with respect to the existing signage. The Victorian Society welcomes the proposals to remove the signage which currently obscures the elevations of the corner tower. The corner tower is a bravura element of the composition intended to dominate the corner of High Holborn and Bloomsbury Street, and we are pleased that Crewe's design will once again be visible in its entirety. We also have no objection to the replacement of the existing principal signboards with LED signage. The reduction in size of the signboard on the west elevation presents some difficulties, however, as it will require the construction of elements of the façade which have never existed in order to complete the symmetry of the central bay. The Victorian Society has no objections in principle to this treatment — indeed, the committee felt that the proposed approach was entirely appropriate in this case — but we would like to emphasise the importance of a thoroughly scholarly approach to the design and the necessity of the highest quality of construction. Given that the proposed new elements will mimic exactly existing features, any discrepancies in material or design will be glaringly obvious and will entirely spoil the effect; every effort must be made to avoid this.

Second, the proposed new entrance on the west elevation to Bloomsbury Street. In principle the Victorian Society has no objection to the creation of a new main entrance in the place proposed. In contrast to the façade at first-floor level and above, the treatment of the ground floor elevations is utilitarian, clearly subordinate to the functional demands of both the ground floor plan and the changing pavement levels. The ground floor elevations include no decorative set-pieces or obvious elements of symmetry and could hence be altered without harming the composition. The detailing of the door and window frames is, however, carefully executed and consistent in design, and an element of unity is brought to the various elements by the cornice at the boundary of the ground floor and the projecting canopy, which runs unbroken all the way around the principal façades. Furthermore,

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although the vertical articulation of the ground floor elevations is irregular, with only the rusticated pilasters marking the continuity of the street and first floor elevations, there is a strong element of horizontal continuity which is emphasized by the uniform height of the door and window heads. On the west elevation this horizontality is particularly marked in contrast to the slope of the pavement towards the south. The detailed designs of the new entrance doors relate badly to this uniformity of character and horizontal emphasis. The demolition elevations show that the cornice will be removed above the new doors, and replaced with new fabric of the same depth but of unspecified profile. We think this is in principle unacceptable as it will seriously compromise the continuous horizontal line of moulding which is such an important part of the coherence of the street-level façade. The strong horizontal emphasis will be further compromised by the proposed doors themselves, which fail to reflect the height of the existing window and door lintels. The design of the new doors has not been detailed very thoroughly in the application documents, but it is clear that they are proposed to be highly glazed, with metal frames. We understand the logic that both the break with the prevailing horizontal articulation and the alien materiality will serve to mark strongly the identity of the new entrance, but believe nonetheless that it is the wrong approach here, not only because the contrast between the scale and materials of the new with the old is jarring, but also in comparison to the careful reconstructive approach to the 'missing' elements of the centre first floor bay. The committee suggest revisions to the plans are sought which adopt the style of Bertie Crewe for this new entrance as well as for the first floor elevations.

Third, the internal alterations including the demolition of staircases and toilets and the provision of a new staircase in the northwest corner to the proposed basement extension. Once more, the Victorian Society has no objection in principle to these alterations. The committee felt, however, that there is not enough detail in the proposals as they stand for it to be able to judge the harm the proposals will cause. The staircase in the south front is described in the conservation study as 'original 1911' but with 'no significant original decorative features of note'; the staircase to the basement and first floor in the northwest corner is not mentioned separately at all. Similarly, the only mention of the many toilets to be removed states of those in the basement that 'the current fit out of WCs detracts from the quality of the space' (Design and Access Statement, Appendix B, Heritage Drawings). Given that these elements are to be substantially destroyed we do not think that these brief descriptions meet the requirement of the NPPF at paragraph 128 that applicants 'describe the significance of any heritage assets affected' at a 'level of detail ... proportionate to the assets' importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance'. What is the significance of the existing staircase to the basement? In describing the emergency exit staircase the heritage drawings state that it 'lacks the prominence and grandeur of the other two front of house stairs'; if the stairs in the north-west corner of the building by implication do not lack this 'prominence and grandeur' then a more thorough description of their significance and a more careful justification for their part-demolition is required. Similarly, are all the toilets proposed for removal modern in character? Do any of the Edwardian fittings remain? The answer may well be no, but the applicant should provide information to demonstrate this. With respect to the proposed new feature stair the committee agrees with the statement in the conservation study that handling the transition from new to old fabric will be challenging and that detailed design drawings will be required. We would like to add that it is not simply the transition within the stair core that must be carefully handled, but also the transition from the Edwardian foyer bar to the new foyer and staircase. From the information provided the design of the new staircase is sleek and modern, and is likely to contrast with the style and finish of both the retained Edwardian stairs and the foyer bar. Given the significance of the surviving Edwardian decorative schemes we think that more detailed designs are needed here at this stage, to ensure that this contrast is handled in a manner which minimises harm.

For these reasons the Victorian Society objects to the application and urges your authority to seek additional information and revisions to the plans.

I would be grateful if you could inform me of your decision in due course.

Yours sincerely

Tom Taylor

Conservation Adviser