

Heritage Design And Access Statement

The Dominion Theatre
Tottenham Court Road
London
W1T 7AQ

On behalf of
Nederlander Dominion Ltd

In association with
Michael Jackson Consulting
September 2018

The Dominion Theatre Stage Modernisation

The Listed Building Application September 2018

1. This statement is in support of a listed building application to replace the existing stage at The Dominion with a palletised modern stage with associated alterations to off stage areas and the provision of disabled access from the Stage Door to the stage and back of house areas. There is also a proposal to create an additional bar in the Milburn Suite, a former cloakroom.
2. The principal elements of the works are :-
 - 1) Removal of the existing stage
 - 2) Retention of the existing stage lift counter-weight mechanism
 - 3) Removal of non-structural walls, partitions and floors in off stage areas
 - 4) Improvement of Stage Door facilities with provision of level access to street stage and performers areas.
 - 5) Installation of bar in the Milburn Suite at stall lobby.

Significance of the Dominion

3. The history of The Dominion is well documented¹. Designed by W and TR Milburn and completed in 1929 it was built as a theatre and opened as such but was also designed with capacity to act as a super cinema as was popular at the time.
4. A key significance of the Dominion is its large capacity and spaciousness. With 2,835 seats on opening it became one of the largest theatres of the time alongside Drury Lane 2,600 and the Lyceum 2,891. In the late 1950's the balcony was blocked off (now studio space) reducing the capacity to 2,000 but even so it continues to be one of only five London commercial theatres with more than 2,000 seats; Drury Lane, Palladium, Lyceum and Apollo Victoria.
5. Initially the Dominion failed to gain traction as a theatre and was mainly a cinema from 1930 to the 1980's. It was sold to Gaumont in 1933 as a cinema and although occasional live shows took place in the late 1950's and 70's and 80's by the time it was listed in 1988 it had been used as a cinema for more than 50 years.
6. With cinema audiences declining the renewed attempts to stage live performances from 1981 to 1990 met with only limited success and, by the end of this period, its future was in doubt with redevelopment as a hotel mooted by owners Rank. The listing in 1988 taking place amidst these threats.
7. A set of the original Milburn design for the theatre and a set of 'as built' drawings have been included in the application for reference.

¹ References the listing cites 'The Architect and Building News' in 4th October, (1929) and 'Architects Journal' in 2nd October, (1929). A comprehensive history is given at Arthur Lloyd.co.uk/Dominion Theatre, and in Gaumont British Cinemas by Allen Eyles.

Recent success as a theatre

8. The building was acquired by Apollo Leisure in 1990 who, in association with the current owners Nederlander, began a process to make the theatre a leading West End musical venue. It has since benefited from a number of successful productions and continuing investment in its restoration.
9. The Dominion's success as a theatre is therefore a relatively recent chapter in its history taking some 70 years to arrive in full.
10. The large capacity of the Dominion is a mixed blessing; it has a relatively unique ability to cater for large audiences in a spacious refurbished auditorium, but needs to attract the productions that fill it.

The recent refurbishment

11. Over the period of its ownership Nederlander has invested in an extensive refurbishment of the building with a major restoration of the auditorium and facade in 2014 following the closure of We Will Rock You. It is generally acknowledged that the building is now in the best decorative state that it has ever been post-war.
12. As one of the largest houses (and with even more capacity available) it has the ability to house the largest shows and the aim is to ensure that it can continue to do so.

Stage modernisation

13. As a large theatre the Dominion was built with a proportionally large proscenium and wide stage but its wings and general stage configuration are not optimum for the major musicals now being designed and produced.
14. Shows have changed since We Will Rock You opened in 2002, some 16 years ago. Shows are now more complex, larger and heavier and producers are using more special effects to entice ever-more demanding audiences to watch their shows.
15. Larger long running musicals very often arrive with automated show decks that sit on the stage floor. Disney's 'Aladdin' is a typical example of a large show that requires an automated show deck to move the significant amount of different scenery on and off stage quickly and electronically-controlled.
16. Automated show decks need flat stages as the embedded automation cannot move the scenery accurately when it is attempting to pull it against the slope of a raked stage floor. Dance related shows also require a flat stage upon which to perform.
17. Modern shows therefore deploy expensive and sophisticated stage technology which are standardised for modern stage configurations. The spectacle created by this technology is a key factor in attracting audiences and shows are created with these aspects at the heart of production with producers investing significant sums in the show technology.
18. As shows have become more ambitious and demanding they have become increasingly problematic for many traditional West End venues. The Dominion has a good size stage and is attractive to these shows but in its current configuration it struggles in the off stage areas with

the result that shows sometimes have to be adapted and customised to what the venue can accommodate off stage.

19. In extremis it can mean leaving elements of the show out with the result that audiences at the Dominion might not see the full show available in other world cities. Furthermore with the investment that they have made if there is choice producers will opt for a venue that meets their full requirements if it is available.
20. Having refurbished the whole of the public areas of the Dominion Nederlander now need to optimise the stage so that it can become the best house for shows in London that will fill a 2,000 seat theatre.
21. In simple terms the project aim is to provide the most flexible stage possible with the fewest constraints for visiting productions. The Dominion needs to be able to offer producers a seamless ability to premier, or bring a show from Broadway, in the configuration that the show is designed to have. If it can do that it will have the ability to maximise the opportunity to fill the house making the most of its key characteristic.
22. The sheer size of the Dominion means that this is a fundamental commercial requirement but equally important for safeguarding the listed building as there is no more secure way of doing that than having the theatre operating successfully at full capacity in a fully refurbished condition. It also sustains the contribution the Dominion makes to the success of the West End as a premier location for musical theatre and to the range of venues in Camden.

Flat Stages at competing venues

23. One of the main characteristics of modern productions is the need to accommodate a show deck on a flat stage. Aladdin is currently showing at the Prince Edward on a flat stage. The Aldwych has a flattened and palletised stage and work is currently underway at Drury Lane for a flat stage. The Apollo Victoria has a flat stage as does the Lyceum.
24. The 3 main 2,000 seat theatres outside London; Manchester Palace, Edinburgh Playhouse, Liverpool Empire all have flat stages.
25. In the last few years many regional stages have been converted to a flat format including; Bristol Hippodrome, Birmingham Alex, Southampton Mayflower, Sunderland Empire.
26. These precedents demonstrate the growing universality of flat stages and as the Lyceum, Drury Lane and Apollo Victoria all have flat stage capabilities the Dominion is the only 2,000 seater in the West End without this important requirement. As each of the Dominion's peers now has a flat stage capability producers are bound to prefer those venues over the Dominion. This is therefore a real threat to the long term sustainability of the theatre, or to put it more positively, by investing in a new stage the Dominion can offer state of the art facilities that cannot be bettered elsewhere.

Works required for the new stage

27. In the past a flat stage for dance has been achieved by building up a temporary fillet to the stage to level it but this involves raising the level of the whole stage to that at the back with a knock on

adverse effect on sight lines from the auditorium². This can then require the seating level to be raised and usually some seats lost.

28. This make do approach provides no solution to the requirement of modern shows to place bridges and stage lifts in any position on the stage. To do this the stage is constructed as palletised or sectional structures that can be adapted on a grid with ease. Parts of the stage are easily removed and replaced for different shows in whatever configuration is required and to replicate the format in other venues.
29. To allow the pallets to be removed as required, it is also ideal to remove all the structural, electrical and mechanical items from beneath the stage floor hence removing any obstructions from the way of any proposed traps / lifts / penetrations, hence preventing them from having to be relocated on a show by show basis.
30. As a consequence of both the levelling and palletisation requirements it is necessary to replace the whole of the existing stage and also take the opportunity to rationalise the off stage areas to create as much flexible open space by removing non-structural walls, partitions and re-aligning floors and services.
31. The need to tailor the sightlines to the stage is not completely removed by a new stage but the works required will suit the stage with less need to be constantly re-adjusted.
32. The works will also include improving the Stage Door facilities and most importantly introducing step free access for disabled people up to the stage and back of house areas. This allows easy access for all including performers which is not currently possible.

Explanation of works and drawings: Stage

33. An explanation of the proposed works in relation to the application drawings is set out below for convenience. These are grouped according to the four principal elements; the alterations to the existing stage, the design of the new stage, the alterations stage right, and the alterations to stage left / stage door.

New Stage

Alterations and Removals

34. The existing stage is shown on the following drawings:-

2933 01-001	Sub Stage Plan
2933 01-002	Sub Stage Plan Structure
2933 01-003	Existing Stage Section

35. The works proposed to the existing stage are shown as follows:-

2933-01-101 A	Existing sub stage showing demolition
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36. This drawing shows that all of the existing timber structure of the stage is to be removed. It identifies the area of the counterweights which are to be retained.

² Lord of the Dance when at the Dominion required an anti-rake stage but with compromised sightlines to the stalls

2933-01-102 Sub-stage plan showing masonry works

37. This shows the works to the masonry structure below the stage.

New Stage Design

38. The new stage is shown on the following drawings:-

2933-01-201	Proposed Joist Layout
2933-01-202	Proposed new stage edge plan
2933-01-203	Proposed section through stage
2933-01-301	Proposed Steelwork Plan

39. The regular palletised format of the stage is shown on these drawings with each area of the stage capable of being removed to suit the production requirements. Drawing 202 shows the slight reduction in the edge of the stage compared to existing.

Stage Right Alterations

Existing Stage Right

40. The layout of the existing stage right area is shown on the following drawings:-

2933-02-001	sub stage lower
2933-02-002	stage right upper
2933-02-003	stage right stalls lower
2933-02-004	stage right upper
2933-02-005	stage right sections
2933-02-006	stage right stage section

Alterations and Removals Stage Right

41. The alterations proposed are shown as follows:-

2933-02-007	sub stage exposure works
2933-02-101	stage right lower removals
2933-02-102	stage right upper removals
2933-02-103	stage right stall lower removals
2933-02-104	stage right upper removals
2933-02-105	stage right sections removal
2933-02-106	stage right sections removal

42. These drawings show the proposed removal of a staircase and changing room to create a more open area to the side of the stage.

Proposed Stage Right

43. The new works stage right are as follows:-

2933-02-201	Proposed sub-stage lower plan
2933-02-202	Proposed SR Upper plan

44. These drawings show the creation of a new corridor to access the existing second staircase at far stage right following removal of the staircase shown on 2933-02-103 and 2933-02-104.

M&E Below Stage

45. All of the services below stage are reconfigured so as to allow complete flexibility with the main stage area. The principal ducts and pipework run around the perimeter of the new stage as shown on these drawings.

Existing

2933-03-001	Existing Sub Stage Lower Plan (Intake and Hillsong Rooms) Location Plan
2933-03-002	Existing Sub Stage Lower Plan (Amp & Hillsong Rooms)
2933-03-003	Existing Sub Stage Lower Plan (Intake & Hatched Door Rooms)

Proposed

2933-03-201	Proposed Sub Stage Lower Plan (Intake and Hillsong Rooms) Location Plan
2933-03-202	Proposed Sub Stage Lower Plan (Amp & Hillsong Rooms)
2933-03-203	Proposed Sub Stage Lower Plan (Intake & New TC Stage Right Room Layouts)

Stage Door Alterations

Existing Stage Left – Stage Door

46. The existing stage door arrangements are shown on:-

Existing

2933-04-001	Stage Left Plan
2933-04-002	Stage Left Sections

47. The Dominion Stage Door is characteristic of many theatres it is very cramped and provides a poor working environment and does not provide adequate access for all.

Proposed Stage Door

2933-04-205	Proposed Stage Left
2933-04-301	Proposed steelwork

48. By amalgamating the manager's office with stage door a more spacious reception space is created at Stage Door with a platform lift to enable wheelchair access to the stage area.

Other works – Milburn Suite Alterations

49. Whilst the stage works are under way it is also proposed to take the opportunity to convert the room known as the Milburn Suite to a small bar serving the Stalls.
50. Located off the stalls entrance lobby the Millburn Suite was originally one of a pair of cloakrooms. The reciprocal cloakroom opposite is now a concessions space. In recent years the Milburn Suite has been used as a Green Room for hospitality with the former cloakroom counter opening boarded up.

Existing

2933-05-001 Existing Ground floor

51. The proposed alterations are primarily the removal of the modern studwork closing the cloakroom from the lobby re-opening this with the creation of a small bar within the room.

Proposed

2933-05-101 Proposed Ground Floor TBR
2933-05-201 Proposed Ground Floor
2933-05-202 Proposed Section
2933-05-203 Proposed Elevations and Sections of bar

The additional bar would not involve any significant loss of original fabric and would enliven the lobby with better facilities for the stalls audiences.

Effect on existing fabric and significances

52. There are two aspects of significance which are most engaged by the works in this application :-
- a. The first is the overarching significance of the Dominion as an example of the large dual capacity theatre / cinema's built in the 1930's with a chequered history as a theatre.
 - b. The second is the stage fabric which is mostly original and therefore has a significance as a part of the original building, although no wider significance as a West End stage per se. The extensive cinema use meaning that the stage played a very minor part in the Dominion's history with far less significance than would be the case in many other theatres.
53. As the stage was largely redundant as a performance area for 70 years it is mostly the original timber structure. It has a central stage lift which is not shown on the original Milburn drawings but is shown on the 'as built' drawings. It would therefore appear to have been added during construction.
54. The original counter balance weights are still in place although with an adapted mechanism and not used for many years. As these are of some interest as an example of original stage technology and are mounted on the wall out of the way it is proposed to retain these in situ as a surviving feature of interest and historic record.
55. Whilst the stage is a part of the original fabric of the building, other than the counterbalance weights, there is nothing else of any special significance with this stage. The flying system, proscenium and orchestra pit are each unaffected by these works. Similarly, the off stage fabric which is to be removed, whilst mostly original, has no special significance and is not structural.
56. The removal of the stage will result in some historic loss but the harm that arises is to be balanced against the harm that would result should the stage not be modernised as that is very likely to mean that the Dominion will not be able to compete with its peers. A stage is obviously an intrinsic feature of a theatre and whilst it is of some interest (even though it was not used) the functionality of the stage is much more significant to the future of the Dominion than it is its past, it is so central to the continued success of the building that it is essential to invest in a modern stage now.
57. There is a direct relationship between the significance of the Dominion as one of the handful of West End theatres with a capacity of 2,000 plus and its need to be able to accommodate the technology of the shows that look for large houses. Clearly the mid to long term sustainability of the theatre depends on being able to fill the venue.
58. Nederlander prioritised the refurbishment of the interior and exterior of the theatre with great benefit to the preservation of the listed building and the enjoyment of audiences. The works have been widely acclaimed. Whilst those works are now complete this application should be assessed within the context of the whole programme of refurbishment works undertaken since 2014. If this is weighed in that context then the balance of benefit to the listed building is clearly overwhelmingly in favour of the preservation of the building by securing a self-sustaining future as a 2,000 seater venue.

Statutory Framing of the decision

59. In the first instance this listed building application falls to be considered in the context of paragraph 16 (2) of the Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas Act 1990 which states :-

In considering whether to grant listed building consent for any works the local planning authority or the Secretary of State shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

The guidance in paragraphs of the NPPF is also relevant and paragraph 193 states that great weight should be given to the asset's conservation irrespective of the degree of harm involved in a proposal.

60. In this context It is hoped that it is self-evident that the renewal of the Dominion stage is now essential if the theatre is to be conserved with a medium to long term life. If it remains as the only large commercial theatre in the West End without a flat stage it will not be able to attract the productions that it needs to fill its seats and quite clearly that is a very real risk to the building long term.

61. The history of the Dominion demonstrates how its size can quickly place it at risk if it cannot attract the predictions to fill the seats. Nederlander wish to invest in the new stage to capitalise on the theatre's inherent attractiveness to the large scale productions. Nederlander have invested in the refurbishment of the public and external areas of the theatre to an exemplary standard and this next phase of the investment is intended to complete the Dominion as a successful large house venue with exemplary facilities for producers and audiences. This will make the whole building fit for purpose as a major theatre venue which exploits the unique characteristics of this very large theatre.

62. Any harm that arises from the removal of the original stage fabric is therefore far outweighed by the improvements made in the recent refurbishment and by the importance of a modern stage to the preservation of the building in active use the future. For this reason when assessed against the requirements of section 16 (2) of the Act and Paragraph 193 of the NPPF the balance is in favour of granting listed building consent for these works.

GCC

20 September 2018.