

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/1097

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Application: 2022/3105/P & 2022/3599/L

Site: Ambassadors Theatre West Street London WC2H 9ND

Proposal: Installation of plant deck at roof level, replacement roof plant including 1 air handling unit and 10 condenser units and associated ducting, external safety lighting, replacement of window with new first escape door at roof level, replacement of timber enclosure at ground floor level fronting onto Tower Court, replacement of 2 ground floor windows on West Street elevation and alterations to entrance door cills on West Street and Tower Court elevations to provide level access; and

External and internal alterations including installation of plant deck at roof level and associated plant equipment and various repair work and redecoration, repairs to internal fabric, alterations and refurbishment of seating, installation of lift, upgrading of building services, new lighting and speakers, structural alterations to the dome, alterations to the bar and other internal decorations.

Remit:

Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in England through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, requiring the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

Comment:

Thank you for consulting the Trust regarding these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at Ambassadors Theatre. They are seeking a number of internal and external alterations. We have been engaged by the applicant during the pre-application period for

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22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

Chair Dave Moutrey **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Paul Cartwright, James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Lucy Osborne, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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which we provided written feedback and undertook a site visit. A copy of our comments has been appended within the applicant's Heritage Statement.

These plans appear little changed from those originally presented to us, with quite minor revisions including one less seat within the bar/foyer area to the lower ground/stalls but one additional within the former control room to the lower circle, a slight change in seating layout within the upper circle, the addition of new radiators within dressing rooms and a WC, plus a refuge point for wheelchair users next to the lift within the stalls and replacement doors to the auditorium from the foyer to meet fire regulations which weren't previously marked. These do not change our overall advice and support for these proposals.

As stated in our pre-application advice which also reflects comments in relation to the previous 2016 application, there is a need for challenges and deficiencies with Ambassadors Theatre to be addressed. It is inaccessible to wheelchair users and does not provide the front of house facilities modern audiences require. There is a general need for upgrade and rationalisation of its services and infrastructure to meet current standards. With around 400 seats the theatre is one of the smallest in the West End. This positively contributes to the overall diversity of theatre spaces within the internationally significant Theatreland cluster. However this, along with its historic and architectural significance and below-ground construction, presents constraints in rectifying those issues.

These proposals address the project's primary objectives. It provides much-needed disabled access into the theatre and an accessible WC. Whilst this is to serve just stalls level whereas best practice is for places to be made available throughout the auditorium, in this instance we accept this is a necessary compromise due to the costs, complexities and constraints of serving the lower and upper circle. Aside from the stepping and steep rake of the upper circle and additional costs that would be incurred, the theatre's already low capacity means that substantial loss of seating would make the venue unviable and furthermore it would be unattractive to producers.

We consider that the location of the new lift is the most appropriate in terms of minimising impact on historic fabric and layout, avoiding need for more fundamental structural changes and it also means that all users enter through the same main entrance which is best practice. This will require alteration to the threshold/step up into the foyer; in our pre-application comments we highlighted a lack of detail on how this will be achieved and urged care in how it will be treated in terms of reflecting existing materials/appearance. We note from the proposed plans that this is still to be determined so will require a condition for submission of further details. This similarly applies to the existing curved timber door and side panel within the foyer. In the auditorium three rows of seating will be removed to the rear, but these seats offered poor views to the stage. Whilst this interrupts the historic layout we consider this to be acceptable due to the substantial public benefit of introducing accessibility and it also facilitates much needed foyer/bar space which is another major objective.

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The loss of seating within the stalls means that to maintain viability replacement capacity needs to be found elsewhere. This is being achieved through rearrangement at the circle level through loss of a cross aisle and other changes as well as conversion of the control desk to a box. Whilst loss of the cross aisle will present some management challenges this is accepted and is a necessary compromise to maintain sufficient capacity for overall viability. Furthermore the overtiering of upper levels will address compliance with current building regulations on trip and fall hazards so also constitutes a public benefit to mitigate impact.

A further benefit of this project is that there will be general refurbishment as well as upgrading of ventilation, wiring and cabling. Details of wired bars to the circle fronts and insertions for ventilation sought in our pre-application comments have been provided. With regard to the replacement plant to the roof, we note the conclusions of the Noise Assessment which sets out that it meets the Council's requirements.

In conclusion this project is less intrusive and harmful to historic significance and character than the previous permitted application. Whilst there is loss and harm to historic fabric and layout, we consider this is mitigated by the public benefits of providing accessibility and improving the theatre's function. Ultimately this enhances its role as a cultural asset and will ensure its future conservation.

Therefore we are supportive of the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments further.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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