

Application Numbers: 09/02842/FUL & 09/02848/LBA

Address:

Theatre Royal,
Saw Close,
Bath BA1 1ET

Proposal:

Refurbishment works to main house auditorium, extension to main house foyer and internal re-modelling, new stalls bar, refurbishment works to circle bars and front of house areas, roof repairs, refurbishment and upgrading of mechanical services, new internal and external lighting proposals

Comments: submitted at 15/09/2009

Bath Heritage Watchdog enters a general comment in respect of this application.

Theatre Royal

The principle building is to a design by Charles Dance the Younger executed by the architect John Palmer in 1802-5. The original entrance is in Beauford Square but this was relocated to the Saw Close following the gutting of the interior by fire in 1862 (the discolouration of which is still visible). The interior was refitted by C J Phipps at this time resulting in the intimate Victorian horseshoe shaped plan that remains today. The tripartite arched Italianate foyer was also added at this time and now incorporates the Box Office. At some point, a canopy was added (the projecting corbels still remain). This was damaged by a lorry in the 1970's and subsequently removed. Further refits and refurbishments have taken place since the last in 1982. Due to the continuing popularity of the theatre and general wear and tear along with the requirement to provide access for the disabled, there is obviously the need for further work. At the same time, the theatre has to continue to function into the future and opportunities taken to incorporate the latest technologies and advances in lighting and heating as well as more efficient means of providing these is largely the work proposed here.

Comments

These comments follow a positive and informative meeting with the architects and members of the theatre for which we offer our thanks. These comments have been forwarded to the architects to see if any of the points raised can be addressed. As can be seen below, we are broadly supportive of the works proposed and it is only the inclusion of the canopy in its current form that prevents us from giving full support at this time. It was unanimously agreed that the scale and materials of the canopy remained the main point of concern. It is hoped these can be subjected to further review. If the applicant supports any of our minor improvements, we would be content to have these secured by condition rather than delaying the application pending submission of new drawings.

We appreciate that some of the points made under the section Minor Concerns (such as the plaque and the clock) do not form part of the application but we feel they are worthy of inclusion and consideration.

Interior Work

The work to the interior is fully supported and seems an admirable balance between satisfying the requirements of a modern functioning theatre without compromising its opulent period interior. The toning down of the carpet, the reduction of visual clutter, the choice of interior wallpaper and such works as the re-positioning of the fire exit signs and the replacement and repair of decorative motifs, cornices and 'trompe-l'œil' features must be considered positive enhancements.

The proposed interior lighting scheme will be a further positive enhancement when combined with the other interior works proposed. The choice of LED lighting over tungsten or miniature fluorescent is fully supported.

The proposed relocation of the disabled access, the adjustment of the floor levels and the installation of a new lift is again fully supported and would seem the most suitable solution to a difficult situation. In view of the limited lift space and the dependence on a single lift, the retention of the possibility of using the existing wheelchair access in Beauford Square is welcomed.

There is also no objection to the works to the cellar area to provide an intimate enhanced space for the stalls clientele.

The interior works to the foyer and the relocation of the Box Office is supported as is the reduction in the visual clutter and the removal of such items as the bulky equipment to produce the heat curtains.

The opening up of the third main door and the creation of a ramped access should increase flow and ease congestion.

Exterior Work

We fully support the location chosen to relocate the bicycle stands. We also fully support the replacement of the blind windows with real ones, and the additional window in the foyer. It is also hoped the removal of intrusive lighting at the entrance to Beau Nash House can be secured.

It is with the remainder of the exterior work proposed that lies our one major concern and a number of lesser minor issues.

We feel that on balance the main extension itself is a sympathetic and respectful external approach to the need for additional space inside the foyer and one which, while contemporary, takes enough cues and echoes from its surroundings to remain in character with the main building. There is room for some minor improvements to the external appearance, and we list those later, but if the applicant chooses not to offer them it would not be justification for any further comment from us.

Our main concern lies with the scale and material of the proposed canopy. In particular, we draw attention to its impact on the visibility of the Royal Coat of Arms, its cutting across and obscuring of the Grade II* listed Beau Nash House (Strada) and its impact on the sight-lines down the street towards Westgate Buildings.

The original canopy is not dated in the historical summary. It is possible that it was added in 1902 along with other major refurbishments (perhaps by the architect Verity) and was an addition to Phipps 1862 Italianate foyer. The projecting brackets that supported the original canopy are stylistically different with dogtooth moulding and trefoils which could indicate the influence of the 'Arts and Crafts' movement. Whatever its origins, it appears not to be part of the original design of the foyer, though it is part of the building's history. We recognise that the canopy currently proposed is historically supported by a 1954 photograph but that does not mean it is an ideal design, particularly when the original was destroyed in a not improbable traffic accident and a similar fate could befall an exact copy.

With regard to the construction, it is not so much the material itself but its size and solidity that is of concern. Our strong preference is to ask if glass could be considered as an alternative, even though the architects believe the Council's Listed Buildings Officer would not be supportive of this. However, there would be some local context with Green Park Station, the Empire Hotel and the Corridor having examples dating from a similar time. In particular, the Green Park canopy (which is made of transparent glass) provides the effect desired for the Theatre Royal of allowing the building above the canopy to be visible through it, thus removing the safety hazard of observers stepping back into the road to obtain a proper view. The reflection in the glass of the building behind, when viewed from afar, would avoid the impression that would be given by a solid surface of a featureless horizontal line.

With regard to the projection of the canopy, we believe the proposed 2.9 metres is of too great a depth and would suggest a projection of ideally 1.7 metres but certainly no more than 2 metres. At the reduced size it would not dominate the view of Beau Nash House (Strada). As an aside, a smaller canopy would be less likely to provide an overnight roof for rough sleepers, though any canopy might provide some shelter if the wind is in a convenient direction.

A possible alternative solution if an all-glass canopy is not considered appropriate, could be the insertion of a glass panel into the canopy through which to view the Royal Coat of Arms on the balustrade, although this would be far less attractive, giving an odd "tunnel vision" effect. If, despite the advantages of a glass canopy, a solid surface is considered essential for historical accuracy, we think that serious consideration should be given to the possibility of the Royal Coat of Arms being replicated underneath the canopy, either painted or etched, to allow a visualisation of the original at pavement level and minimise the risk of observers standing in the road to see the original above the canopy. This artwork could perhaps be a commissioned piece.

There is, of course, the potential that there will be enhancements and alterations to the Saw Close area as part of the public realm strategy. However, these are some way off and could be subject to change of plans or current trends, so we recommend that the theatre makes no design decisions that depend on any changes to the public realm in the Saw Close area.

Minor Issues

We expect to be fully supportive of the lighting scheme as proposed, but would like to see a mock-up of the spread and colour of the illumination on the stone if possible, to reassure ourselves that it will look as we envisage it.

The other issues are:

We are concerned about the ultimate fate of the main doors. Whilst we accept the reasons for replacing them as entrance doors to the foyer, they are too good to throw away, they match the doors to be retained on the Pit and Gallery entrances and they have the "stylish plush" appearance that is in the right style for the theatre. We would hope that these could be retained and used elsewhere in the scheme (such as in the new cellar bar) either as functioning doors or as a decorative feature such as screens of seating dividers.

On the replacement doors, we would like to see more decoration, particularly at transom level where some etched or stained glass could be considered. The glass doors themselves will need some manifestation to meet Health & Safety regulations and we suggest that picking up the rectangle over diamond characteristics on the existing doors as manifestations on the new glass ones would provide some form of historic continuity.

We believe the gold "Theatre Royal" lettering on the south elevation should be preserved but re-affixed on the new foyer extension in the blank area above the bill boards. At present, this sign provides the only visual indicator of the theatre's location for those arriving from the south, and the blank area looks rather too blank without some form of content.

The historic Beau Nash plaque on the rusticated column to the left of the foyer needs restoring to its original condition. Consideration should be given to the impact of staining from the bronze on the new stonework or paint. It may also be worthwhile researching into who inaugurated this plaque as these opening ceremonies were usually high profile events with the "A" list celebrities of their age officiating: they drew large crowds and were often photographed. If such provenance could be found, it could provide an interpretative feature in one of the newly created spaces.

The other plaque would benefit from similar restoration and possible relocation. The new blank wall above the string course alongside the existing doorway arches is as bare as its counterpart around the corner, and the plaque would add some visual interest here like the "Theatre Royal" would do to the other surface.

One point of note: there is no highly visible clock in the foyer area of the theatre other than the small one in the corner of the Box Office. We have noticed a number of people regularly check their watches on entering for the evening and a more visually prominent timepiece, located at the top of the stairs for example, could be a feature. Could a period device be acquired or loaned? Something like an original Victorian station clock would be contemporary with the foyer, or perhaps there may even be an old school clock or something similar in the Council's store? A modern replica of an old clock could even be justified as part of a 2010 restoration of a Victorian lobby if reliability is a major concern.