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**Theatres
Magazine**

Summer
2025

Looking to the future

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Theatres Magazine

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Soho Theatre, Walthamstow
Photo: David Levene

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Soho Theatre Walthamstow

Photo: Philip Vile

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Kit Kat Club
at Playhouse, London

Photo: Peter Ruthven Hall

CEO's Welcome

Theatres Trust CEO Joshua McTaggart introduces this issue of TM.



Welcome to our summer issue of Theatres Magazine.

It has been a little over six months since I wrote my first TM Welcome, and it is fair to say that there has been a lot of change and transformation in quite a short amount of time. Firstly, the eagle-eyed amongst you may have noticed that my title has changed. It has been agreed that instead of a Director, Theatres Trust will now have a CEO at the helm, and I am very proud to therefore take the role as the organisation's first Chief Executive.

But there may well be more changes on the horizon than just my job title. Many of you will have seen the news that, as part of the government's major overhaul of the planning system, our long-held role as a Statutory Consultee in the English planning system will be reviewed in a government consultation.

Since that announcement, I have been inspired by the response from our supporters across the theatre and heritage sectors, as well as in local government, architecture, cultural policy, and professional services. I know that the work Theatres Trust does is rigorous, balanced, expert, and much needed to ensure we deliver on our mission to protect theatres across the country for the benefit of the nation.

It is important to remind ourselves that this is a consultation, and when it does publicly launch, we will have an opportunity to present the data and insight that Theatres Trust diligently collects to show that we are a solid partner to the government in delivering growth across the country, while ensuring communities have access to the life-changing cultural activities that our theatres play host to on a daily basis. As and when the public consultation launches, we will be in touch with you – our closest supporters – to explain how you can share your opinions on the questions the government is asking.

I want to encourage our supporters to see this public consultation as an opportunity to reflect on and champion 50 years of incredible work of the Theatres Trust. When the government of 1976 signed into being the Theatres Trust Act, they brought about almost five decades of built-in protection for this country's vital cultural infrastructure. Although the framing of the consultation may come as a challenge, I hope we can use it as a springboard into celebrating our 50th Anniversary in 2026. The team is currently working on exciting plans for next year to commemorate this important milestone, and we will soon be sharing more information on how you can get involved in celebrating with us.

As with planning for any big birthday, it has meant we have had to prioritise where we put our time and energy, especially given our casework is as busy as ever. We have therefore decided that we will not be holding a conference this autumn, but we will soon be announcing some small-scale events where our supporters can gather, connect, network, and share in their passion for the theatres of this country. We will return next

autumn with a reformatted and reinvigorated large-scale event, and we will be in touch over the coming months to discuss how we can ensure this event will meet the needs and expectations of our supporters. Hopefully, this summer issue of TM gives you a taste of what's going on for Theatres Trust and theatres across the country right now. We report back on recent recipients of two of our grant programmes:

Theatre Improvement Scheme in association with the Wolfson Foundation (pg 10) and the Small Grants Programme (pg 4). Our Work in this issue has expanded beyond its previous focus on planning casework to include a wider look at the support provided by our Advice Service (pg 22). I hope you will find this broader flavour of our work informative. We catch up on the progress being made to save Theatre at Risk Amulet Theatre in Shepton Mallet (pg 7), as well as reporting the good news for another Theatre at Risk, the Epstein Theatre in Liverpool (pg 21).

The Showcase feature in this issue is Soho Theatre Walthamstow (pg 13), which many readers will know as Walthamstow Granada from its time in our Theatres at Risk Register. I am incredibly proud of Theatres Trust's pivotal role in bringing this incredible theatre back into use as a comedy and live performance venue. The Theatres Trust team and I were recently given a brilliant behind-the-scenes tour of this remarkable building, a towering testament to investing in heritage on our high streets, and a leading example of Theatres Trust's work.

Over recent months, I have also had the joy of returning to my West Country stomping grounds and visiting the Bristol Old Vic and Bath Theatre Royal. I finally got to see the historic thunder run in the roof of the Bristol Old Vic. Last month, the whole team and trustees visited north Wales for our annual Away Day, which involved a hard hat tour of Theatr Clwyd, which is in the final stages of its major redevelopment. There's nothing quite like a look at a theatre in the final stages of a capital project, and I urge you all to make the trip to Mold and see what Clwyd has to offer this autumn.

Now that I feel a little more settled into my role, I am hoping to be out and about even more over the summer and autumn months. If you have a venue or a capital project that you'd like to show me and the team around, please do reach out to us. I'd love to hear from you, and I'd love to see what you're working on.



**Team Away Day at
Theatr Clwyd**

Team News

We have recently welcomed two fantastic people to our staff team at Theatres Trust.



Michelle Carwardine-Palmer

Michelle Carwardine-Palmer joined in January as Head of Theatre Management and manages our Advice Service along with Claire Appleby, Head of Theatre Buildings. Michelle provides advice around the effective operation of theatres, including fundraising and viability, as well as managing our grant programmes. Michelle graduated from an English and Performing Arts degree and has over 20 years of senior arts executive management

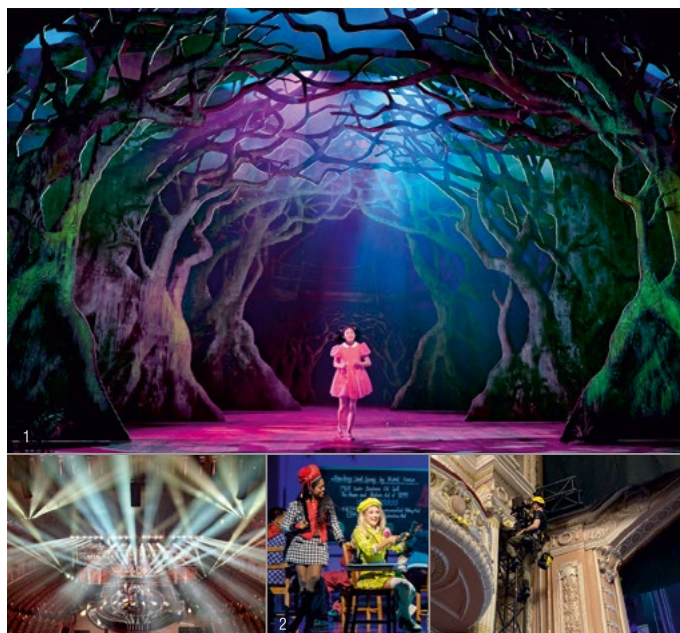
experience within the cultural sector, working in commercial, receiving and producing houses. These have included the Wycombe Swan, Barbican Theatre, New Greenham Arts, Newbury Corn Exchange and Salisbury Playhouse, as well as a site-specific / located producing company, National Theatre Wales. Over the last five years, Michelle has been providing senior executive consultancy and interim CEO support for a number of organisations across the UK, such as Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Punchdrunk Enrichment, Chichester Festival Theatre and National Dance Company Wales. If you want advice about your theatre operations, please get in touch via advice@theatrestrust.org.uk in the first instance.



Karen Phillips

Karen Phillips joined Theatres Trust in May as Head of Partnerships and Philanthropy. Karen is responsible for the development and management of relationships relating to income generation, from events, trusts and foundations, corporate partners, and individual givers, as well as overseeing our Patrons, Friends, Corporate Supporters and Ambassador programmes. Karen has been working in the charity sector for 25 years,

across health, children's, international development, and mental health charities. Karen would like to talk to you, whether you are an existing supporter or want to discuss new ways of working together. Do reach out to her by email via karen.phillips@theatrestrust.org.uk if you are interested in having a conversation.

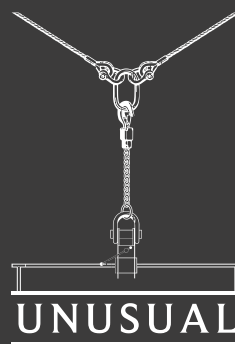


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Small Projects = BIG IMPACT

Theatres Trust is delighted to be able to support 21 more not-for-profit theatres through our ever-popular Small Grants Programme with The Linbury Trust.

Thanks to the ongoing support of The Linbury Trust as well as funding from the Charles Michael Holloway Charitable Trust and the Mackintosh Foundation, Theatres Trust is able to fund not-for-profit theatres to deliver small projects that make a big difference to their resilience, sustainability, and accessibility, or to increase the diversity of their audiences. The vast array of projects funded in this round illustrates the many ways that theatres are keen to improve their buildings to welcome wider audiences and host a broader range of performances and activities.

The **Corn Exchange** in Newbury has received funding to install a new live-audio accessibility system, which can be used by hearing-impaired audience members with their own smartphones. **Arts Centre Washington** in Sunderland and **The Y Centre** in Leicester will both install hearing loops in their venues. Projects to make buildings more accessible are also being funded at the **Barn Theatre** in Welwyn Garden City, **Little Angel Theatre** in London, and **The Place Theatre** in Bedford.



The Old Market, Hove

Photo: Rosie Powell

Funding will support **The Old Market** in Hove to continue its innovative 360-degree digital projection format in a more environmentally friendly and time-efficient way by installing a permanent projection-grade gauze on a runner system. Digital updates are also being funded at **CatStrand** in Castle Douglas, Scotland, and **Kidz r Us** in Tredegar, Wales.

Environmental sustainability projects funded include LED upgrades and replacing boilers at the **Ilkley Playhouse**, **Millgate Arts Centre** in Saddleworth, Oldham, **Pound Arts Centre** in Corsham, and the **Puppet Theatre Barge** in London.

**NAPA:
Northern Academy
of Performing
Arts, Hull**



Awards from this programme will also allow the volunteer-led **Glusburn Institute Community and Arts Centre** near Keighley in Yorkshire to transform a disused education room into a versatile, mixed-use space. **Eccles Town Hall** and **NAPA: Northern Academy of Performing Arts** in Hull both received grants to make vital improvements to their buildings. **The Cut** in Halesworth, **Half Moon Young People's Theatre** and **Theatre Peckham**, both in London, **Lawrence Batley Theatre** in Huddersfield, and **St Joseph's Hall** in Leigh have been awarded funding for essential repairs and safety projects that will ensure these theatres remain safe and welcoming spaces.

The deadline for the next round is Friday 16 January 2026. More information about the Small Grants Programme, eligibility and previous award recipients can be found on our website: theatrestrust.org.uk/smallgrants



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movingair^{em}



Local residents
on donated theatre seats
outside the Amulet

Photo: Jason Bryant

Amulet Theatre: Past, Present and (Hopefully) Future

Theatres Trust's support is helping to progress the project to revive the Amulet Theatre. We catch up with the community group behind the campaign and the design team, helping them to find out more about this fascinating theatre.

The Amulet Theatre in Shepton Mallet was built in the early 1970s as a philanthropic gift from the Showering family, the local brewers famed for Babyham. It was intended to provide a cultural and creative legacy in the town. However, since 2011, it has been under private ownership, in use as a gym and threatened with redevelopment into apartments. We added it to our Theatres at Risk Register in 2022, which sparked renewed interest in this Brutalist gem and galvanised local support to begin the campaign to return the theatre to its rightful place as an asset for the whole community. Let's Buy the Amulet, a consortium of four local organisations made up of residents and arts group leaders, came together to progress plans to revive the Amulet.

Unusual origins of a unique design

Expert in 20th-century British architecture, Dr Alistair Fair provides context for the history and design of the Amulet, which sets it apart from other theatres.

The venue was realised amid a wider boom in theatre-building which took in the length and breadth of Britain, from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. The construction of

many of these theatres was at least partly supported by public subsidy. However, the Amulet was entirely funded by a private donation from Francis Showering. After several developer-led schemes for redevelopment in Shepton Mallet town centre had failed to secure approval, Showering stepped in. In 1971, he purchased the town centre site and financed the development personally, spending some £1.5 million overall. The design work was awarded to the Wyvern Design Group, with Terry Hopegood as the partner in charge, while the job architects were Paul White and Henry Alpass.

Showering was adamant that the new town centre must be alive during the day and into the evening, so the design brief included not only shops and offices but also a community hall and housing.

Whereas the shops and flats to Town Street feature modest bay windows, render, rubblestone and concrete arches in keeping with buildings on adjoining sites, the auditorium / hall block is bolder. It is composed as a series of masses of polygonal plan whose chamfered corners echo the work of Howell Killick Partridge and Amis (the Young Vic Theatre, London, 1970), or Renton Howard Wood (the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, 1971). The way in which essentially octagonal spaces and

volumes are deployed consistently across the plan from the stage to smaller enclosures such as the entrance lobby brings Peter Moro's work to mind (the Gulbenkian Centre, Hull, 1969). However, the design is far from derivative. The theatre's scale and solidity respond well to the neighbouring church, while the use of stone blockwork and lead also serves as a contextual device.

The auditorium is notable for its flexibility. Showering wanted a range of functions, but the site was too constrained to provide both a flat-floored sprung dancefloor and a tiered auditorium. To accommodate both within a single space, screw jacks set at the sides of the space allow the seating rake to rise and be stored within the ceiling void, enabling either raked seating or flat floor use. This approach was inspired by a similar arrangement in the London headquarters of Barclays Bank. Terry Hopegood knew a senior director at Barclays who mentioned it to him, and a visit to see the space in action with Francis Showering led to it being deployed at Shepton Mallet. The Amulet appears to be the only example of an arts venue which took up this idea.



Community engagement

Let's Buy the Amulet hoped to benefit from the last round of Levelling Up funding to help purchase the theatre, but those hopes were dashed when the funding was withdrawn due to a change of government. The group was undeterred and continues to look for a route to buy and upgrade the theatre. Theatres Trust has supported the group with a grant from our Resilient Theatres: Resilient Communities grant scheme to assist with next steps. Martin Berkeley from Let's Buy the Amulet explains more.

The support from Theatres Trust through its Resilient Theatres: Resilient Communities programme comes at a perfect time for our campaign to reopen the Amulet. We have just been granted access to the ground floor of the building and really need this professional compliance work, funded by the grant, to make the meanwhile space safe and also to finalise our longer-term plans for the rest of the building.

Our summer meanwhile activities will include a broad range of performances to demonstrate the potential of the building, grow support for our project and allow us to launch our community share offer. A temporary 60-seat auditorium is being constructed on the ground floor. It will be fitted out with donated theatre seating from Cambridge Arts Theatre and completed with a mini dressing room and lighting booth. Here we will host small-scale live performances of classic plays and contemporary shows, together with occasional Saturday afternoon family cinema screenings. Professional guidance on fire safety,



toilet provision, ventilation and accessibility will enable our volunteer team to deliver an affordable pop-up venue that is fully compliant with current building standards.

A complete understanding of the compliance work required to fully reopen the Amulet is also essential for our campaign to raise capital funding. The original 1975 design will require updating to modern accessibility standards while retaining as much of the original character of the building as possible.

A vision for the future

Ian Chalk Architects (ICA) has been supporting Let's Buy the Amulet to develop short and long-term plans. Ian Chalk discusses his company's involvement.

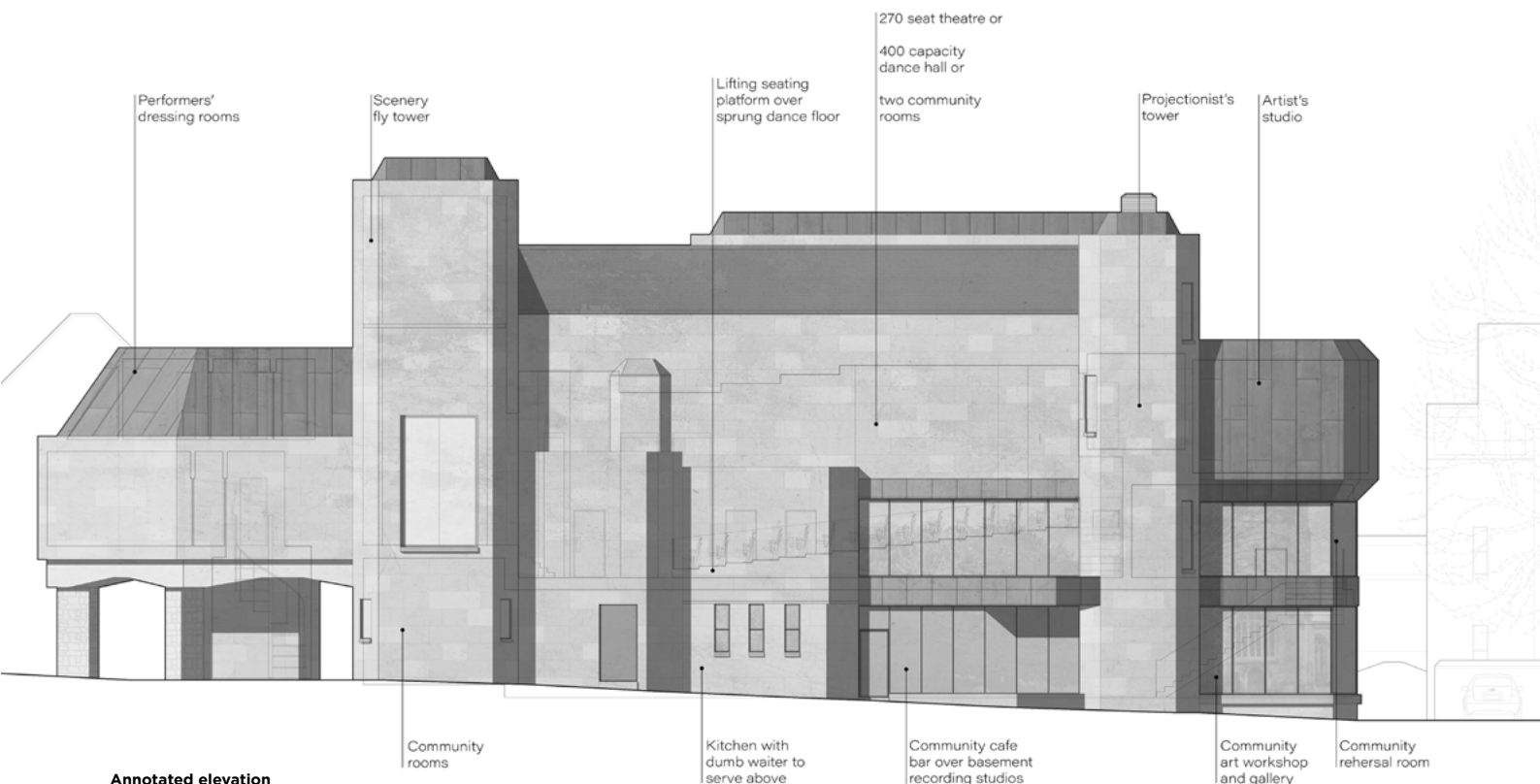
ICA has been working with Let's Buy the Amulet after a chance meeting with Martin Berkeley at the Theatres Trust conference in October 2024. Our role has grown to be multi-faceted, we are:

- Providing guidance on project strategy.
- Preparing as built, as found and as proposed drawings.
- Advising on building control compliance and health and safety matters, with a wider group of consultees.
- Undertaking historic research and interviews with the original architects.
- Assisting with promoting the community campaign including commissioning a specialist theatre heritage assessment.

Funding from the Theatres Trust Resilient Theatres: Resilient Communities Skills Bank has contributed to preparing a visioning piece describing future plans for the building. Framed as 'a day in the life' of the Amulet, 3-D axonometric drawings for the whole building show the spaces populated and in use at various times of day. These drawings sit alongside a detailed schedule of events describing how the building could be programmed across a day, week, month, and year. This work has proven invaluable for testing the brief and wider community engagement.

Theatres Trust will continue to support Let's Buy the Amulet with its efforts, including the crucial fundraising needed to purchase the building. There is a long road ahead before the Amulet can be fully reopened. Still, it is fantastic to see the exciting plans for the meanwhile use and longer-term vision, as well as the enthusiasm and determination of all involved.

More details about Let's Buy the Amulet's plans, how to get involved and the community share offer can be found on its website: buytheamulet.org.uk



Annotated elevation
and vision for future use

Photo: redraft by
Ian Chalk Architects

Given the Green Light

We look at the successful projects in the latest round of the Theatre Improvement Scheme in association with the Wolfson Foundation and catch up with some theatres funded in previous years.



New Wolsey
Theatre, Ipswich

Photo: Will Green Photography

Nine more theatres were awarded a share of £170,000 from our grant scheme with the Wolfson Foundation in the 2024 round, bringing the total number of environmental projects supported through the fund to 41.

One of the scheme's funding criteria is "theatres that achieve excellence", whether that is through their producing or programming, community engagement or their building's architectural significance. The range of theatres funded in this round perfectly illustrates the true range of cultural excellence found in theatres across the country, with recipients including a Theatre of Sanctuary that provides support for refugees and asylum seekers (**Sherman Theatre** in Cardiff), a learning theatre (**Derby Theatre**) and a building dedicated to working with

those experiencing homelessness (**The Old Fire Station** in Oxford). This reminds us that sustainability goes hand in hand with civic pride and empowering communities.

Upgrading lighting to energy-efficient LEDs continues to be the most popular way that theatres are seeking to reduce their environmental impact. **The Courtyard Centre for the Arts** in Hereford is one of five theatres that received funding in this round to upgrade tungsten stage lighting to LEDs. When completed, the project will reduce electricity usage in its main house and two studio spaces by 90%. The Courtyard is committed to recycling and reducing waste, with its traditional lighting being offered to small local theatres and some of the tungsten lights being upcycled and converted by artisan makers

to create domestic standard lamps. **Broadway Theatre Catford** in London, **CentreStage** in Kilmarnock, **Sherman Theatre** in Cardiff, and **Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds** also received grants for similar stage lighting projects.

Two Roderick Ham-designed theatres, **Derby Theatre** and Ipswich's **New Wolsey Theatre**, will switch to LEDs and introduce timers, movement and light sensors in front and back of house areas, following advice on the most appropriate green actions for mid-century theatres in the Theatre Green Book. Similarly, **The Old Fire Station** in Oxford, which offers opportunities to people who are homeless, socially isolated or disadvantaged, will upgrade its domestic lighting to LEDs with movement sensors.

**The Old Fire
Station, Oxford**Photo: Offbeat
Festival

The final theatre supported in this round is **SPID Theatre**, which makes art advocating for housing justice from its home on the Kensal House Estate in London's Ladbroke Grove. Built in 1936 by architect Maxwell Fry and social reformer Elizabeth Denby, the Grade II* listed estate contains a theatre and community rooms that were a crucial part of their vision for improving the lives of the urban poor. The first part of the innovative two-part project will fund the installation of curtains in the main hall to provide a level of insulation that will keep the theatre at a comfortable temperature without needing heating. Secondly, green walls will be created in the outdoor waiting area, which will have a myriad of benefits, including removing air pollutants, improving biodiversity and reducing noise.

Theatre Improvement Scheme projects revisited

Following the success of the majority of its front of house transitioning to LED globe lights, **Dundee Rep** needed to replace houselights with LED lights in its auditorium to continue improving its energy efficiency and save money in the longer term. The results of this upgrade, following our grant, have been astounding. These lights

had been in place for 21 years and cost approximately £7,400 in annual running costs. The theatre estimates it is now making savings of £6,879 per year (a 92% saving) and an 88% saving in CO2 per year.

Housed in a converted 1930s cinema, **Storyhouse** is the only arts venue in Chester. It acts as a warm hub for the community in the winter months, so it is vitally important that its spaces can be heated efficiently. The project was to install some solar panels on the building, but the theatre realised that, given the scale of the project – the need to close roads for cranes and commissioning electricians – it should fit out the entire roof. With our grant for £20,000, the venue secured a

further £25,000 from Cheshire West and Chester Council in partnership with Groundwork. The completed project will enable the theatre to reduce its carbon emissions, generate more self-sustaining power, and make significant savings, thus ensuring it can continue to provide a warm welcome for the people of Chester.

The deadline for the 2025 round of the Theatre Improvement Scheme is Friday 5 September. Visit our website for more information about eligibility and the application process: theatretrust.org.uk/how-we-help/grants-funding/theatre-improvement-scheme

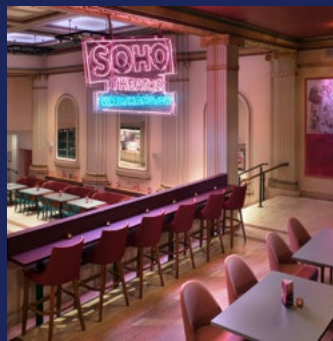
Storyhouse, Chester

Photo: Mark McNulty





Images Philip Vile



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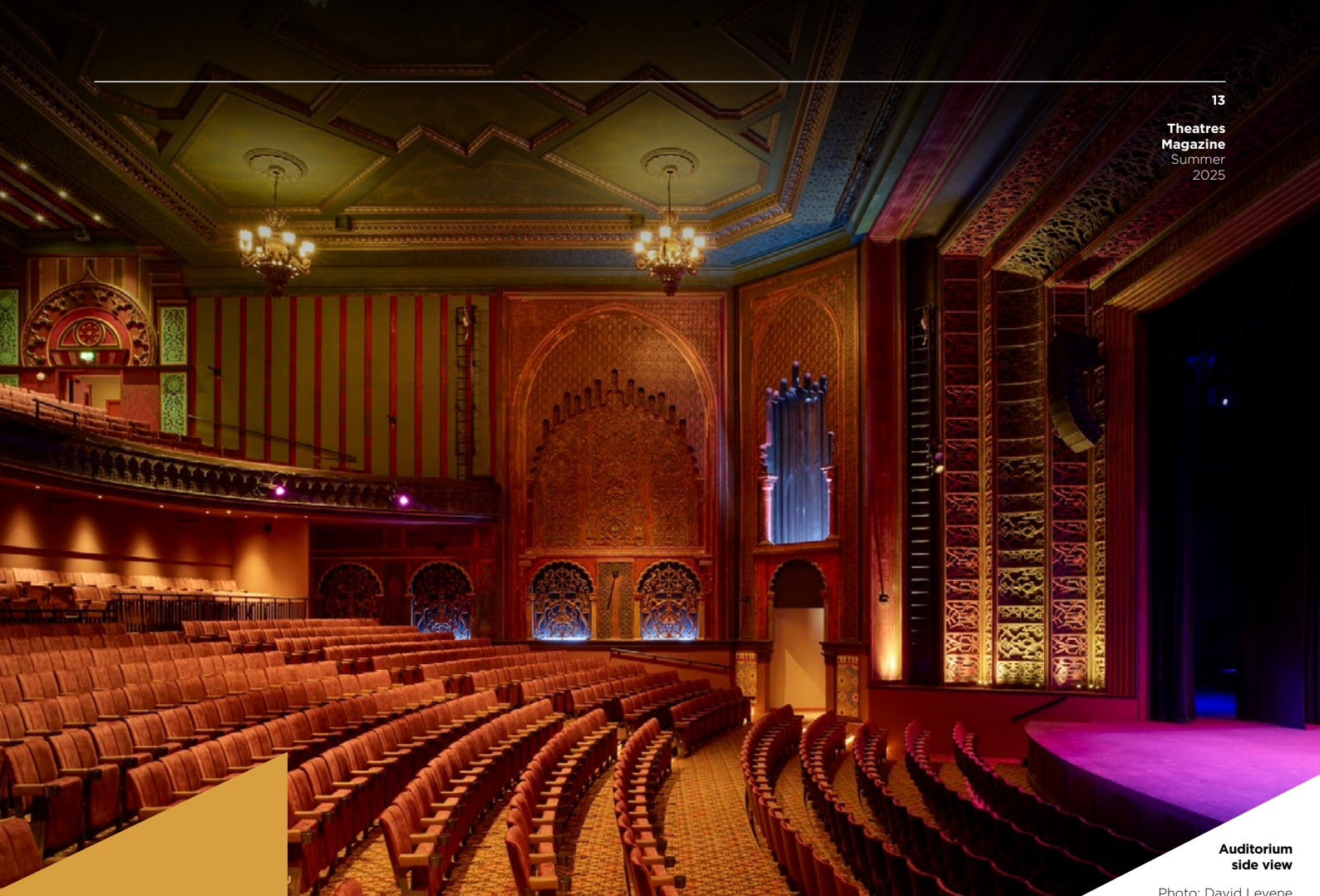
Auditorium
side view

Photo: David Levene

Showcase

Soho Theatre Walthamstow

Paul Crosbie, Project Director and Theatre Consultancy Lead from Plann charts the journey of Walthamstow Granada, a former Theatre at Risk, from its roots as an interwar cinema to a modern theatre space.

The genesis of Soho Theatre Walthamstow

In November 1929, the (then) Walthamstow Borough Council approved plans for the New Victoria Cinema. Construction began immediately, marking the start of a journey that would eventually lead to the Soho Theatre Walthamstow, the latest addition to the London Borough of Waltham Forest's long-standing and diverse cultural landscape, and a self-styled local theatre with a national profile.

The building stands on the site of the former Victoria Hall, a music hall dating from 1886 that, after significant alterations, began to exhibit films in 1907. The cinema ran until 1928, when Sidney Bernstein bought the site. Bernstein planned to replace Victoria Hall with a new cinema, which would become the second to open in his growing Granada cinema chain, and the Walthamstow Granada as we know it was born.

The building was originally designed by Cecil Aubrey Masey, effectively Bernstein's house architect. The interiors were designed by Theodore Komisarjevsky, a Russian immigrant best known as a theatrical costume and set designer. Over time, Komisarjevsky would go on to design several interiors for the Granada cinema chain.

The combination of Masey's utilitarian brick box with a Hollywood-style Spanish façade, Komisarjevsky complex, and rich Spanish Baroque interiors (a less-than-subtle nod to the Alhambra Palace in the Granada region of Spain, where Bernstein reportedly holidayed) resulted in a truly beautiful building that was widely lauded in the press when it opened in September 1930. It was initially listed for its architectural significance in February 1987 and this was upgraded to II* in 2000.

Showcase



Ziggurat Bar

Photo: David Levene

The large, single-screen auditorium was initially commercially viable, but as demand declined, the programme expanded to include variety, pantomime, and live music, featuring performances by The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Duke Ellington, to name a few.

The building has followed a similar path to many others in recent years. The large auditorium was split into three smaller cinema screens, at a time when conservation was not high on the agenda. The building passed through the hands of various chains before an independent operator took it on, renamed it the EMD Cinema and began screening Bollywood films.

The cinema closed permanently in 2003. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) then bought the building and submitted a planning application to convert it for church use. This prompted the local McGuffin Film Society to spearhead a campaign to save the cinema. Theatres Trust strongly objected to the change of use application, and with the support of Waltham Forest Council, the application was refused.

Waltham Forest Council was keen to see the Granada restored to its former glory and, with the encouragement of Theatres Trust, saw its enormous potential as a live performance venue, especially since the borough did not have a permanent theatre space. The council engaged Ian Ritchie Architects to produce some high-level design studies ahead of opening exploratory dialogue with a range of potential future partners for the venue. Following these exploratory works, the council chose to engage with Soho Theatre and asked them to develop a business case. It then appointed Pilbrow & Partners to develop a concept design.

The proposals for a commercially viable, community-facing venue in the heart of the

borough were considered achievable, with the council's support in buying and renovating the building. As a result of this partnership approach, the Secretary of State upheld the decision to refuse planning permission to UCKG in 2013.

Throughout this period, the building fell badly into disrepair. The Victoria pub, which tenanted the original cinema restaurant on the first floor, continued to trade when UKCG sold the building to the Antic pub group in 2014. The group went on to open Mirth, Marvel & Maud, a pub housed in the original foyer. That same year, the building was added to the Theatres Trust's Theatres at Risk Register, where it remained until 2023.

Pilbrow & Partners continued to work for Waltham Forest Council, completing RIBA Stage 2 in 2016, ahead of the council purchasing the building in 2019. In 2020, the last two businesses left the site and work on the theatre restoration project began in earnest.

A joint vision

The project was initially driven by the widely felt necessity to save the building, and once Waltham Forest Council committed to the project, work began to develop a clear vision to create an iconic cultural venue with a contemporary and inclusive programme, respectful of the building's remarkable heritage. The project needed to provide an accessible space for community education and talent development while being a driver for economic regeneration in the borough.

Within these parameters, Soho Theatre envisioned an appropriately scaled comedy venue. It would be larger than its Dean Street premises but more intimate than the Hammersmith Apollo, suitable for developing new talent and presenting established acts. Both partners felt strongly about ensuring that the building would be welcoming to all, accessible, and environmentally sustainable.

Respectful renewal

The architectural strategy for the restoration was typical for a building of this type, though the team had a head start as they had converted the cinema to smaller screens. The original auditorium capacity was reduced from 2,697 to 962, which equates to 674 in the stalls and 288 in the gallery. This was achieved by walling off the rear 18 rows of the stalls under the gallery to create the Ziggurat Bar, and the last 12 rows of the gallery to make way for the plinth accommodating the new studio above. The original plaster ceilings were retained in both cases, resulting in a stunning and expansive-yet-intimate bar and a characterful community space.

The original stalls seating rake was almost flat to allow for forward sightlines to the cinema screen. However, this design was no longer suitable, and Theatre Projects worked with Bond Bryan and Studio M to develop the new, steeper rake to deliver uninterrupted sightlines with comfortable back-to-back measurements of over 90 centimetres. The seating rake in the gallery was steepened slightly to allow an improved downward sightline to the stage, rather than the previous forward-facing sightline to the screen.

The original stage house was large enough to accommodate bands or dancers but lacked a fly tower or backstage facilities. A fly tower was added, though unusually, as a result of planning restrictions, it is not of sufficient height to allow live flying without excessive deep masking on stage. There is external ramped access to the stage via a set of standard height double doors, so no theatrical get-in per se, rather a means of getting flight-cases and smaller components back of house. Neither of these issues were considered

problematic in a comedy venue, although the impact of these restrictions remains to be seen as the creative programme evolves.

A new wrap-around extension over two levels to the north and east of the site provides back-of-house accommodation. It includes one accessible dressing room at stage level, additional dressing room accommodation for up to 27, a green room, a workshop, and technical and production offices.

The cinema's former north external escape route has been enclosed to form the stage door area at the east end of the building, and a new commercial unit on Hoe Street. In addition to the stage door keeper, the stage door accommodates four hot-desk positions, initially intended for staff working between the two Soho Theatre sites.

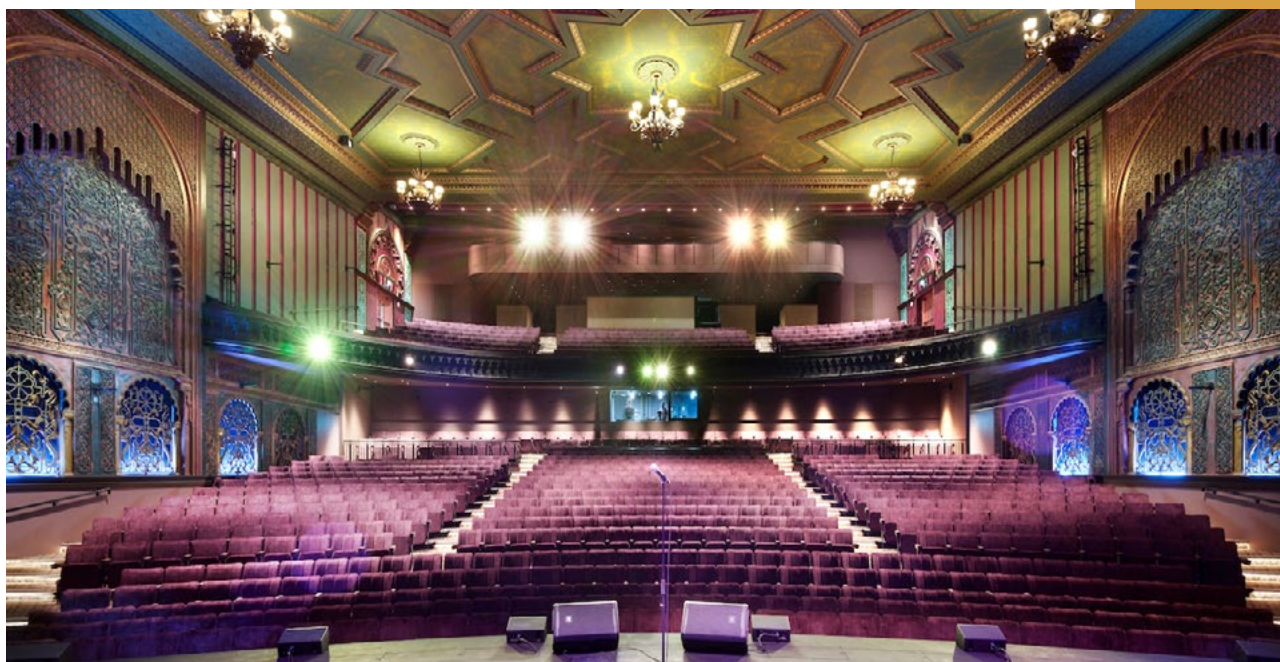
The east elevation fronts Hoe Street, where the façade has undergone discreet works to replace the top of the central section damaged during World War II. The main entrance doors are fully reinstated, with the canopy above modified to accommodate new signage and lighting, and in doing so, losing the original scalloped underside. The original Crittall windows on this elevation have been fully refurbished. Over the doors, the former cinema restaurant has been converted into a stand-alone commercial unit.

To the south of the site are the gates providing ramped access to the stage. Immediately adjacent is a pedestrian gate offering access to a new side extension, housing a secondary entrance to Level 2, where the main studio, a smaller secondary studio, a podcast suite, and the Soho Theatre offices are located. This arrangement allows these spaces to be used without opening the entire building, and was a key consideration for energy efficiency.

Showcase

**Auditorium
from stage**

Photo: Philip Vile



Showcase

A busy foyer

Photo: Philip Vile



A series of ramped entrances, elevators and platform lifts tie the historic building levels together and ensure that the site is more accessible, and a Changing Places toilet facility has been installed. These upgrades reflect the council's proactive approach to improving accessibility across the borough.

The front-of-house areas of the building, which include the foyer, the Crosshall bar and the north and south circulation wings, remain largely unchanged. However, space has been found to add more toilets, a new bar store, a chilled cellar, and a small kitchen.

The historic structure required some rebuilding to the south of the site, where a third commercial unit was formed. The three commercial units will generate rental income to offset the Soho Theatre peppercorn rent.

Technical integration

Installing modern theatre technologies in a building of this kind is always challenging, and particular care had to be taken when working in architecturally significant areas such as the gallery front and the auditorium ceiling. Theatre Projects worked with Soho Theatre to devise a cost-effective, specialist technical infrastructure that would support their original creative objectives, while allowing them to grow over time. A high degree of future-proofing was incorporated in the systems design, and it took a few attempts to achieve the required results in these areas.

Bringing Soho-style to East London

When you visit Soho Theatre Walthamstow for the first time, you cannot help but be awed by the glorious interiors throughout the building. While it is tempting to reference Komisarjevsky

and leave it there, that would be doing an injustice to JaneJaney and Studio M, the team responsible for developing the theme and detailing the design of the revitalised interiors.

From the outset, Soho Theatre wanted the building to embody its values and identity rather than being a straightforward conservation or restoration project. Working closely with Historic England, the council's conservation officer, Helen Hughes - Historic Interiors Research & Conservation, JaneJaney and Studio M developed specific colour-schemes and styles, which are now deployed throughout the building. These are an evolution of the Soho style, rather than a faithful representation of what has gone before in the building. The various bar counters, installed furniture, fixtures, fittings, and final dressings were all designed by this team.

The art panels in the front-of-house areas are original designs by JaneJaney, while the exterior and interior illuminated Soho Theatre signage is by Studio M - it wouldn't be a Soho building without some neon lighting. Although the auditorium is broadly described as having an arrested-decay finish, the ceiling and some of the wall panels have been scenically painted by Wilmott Dixon's decorating subcontractor, Winchmore, under the supervision of Historic England. JaneJaney and Studio M made all fabric selections, including for the new theatre seats, designed by Theatre Projects in collaboration with Kirwin and Simpson.

Significant areas of historic plasterwork throughout the building have been badly damaged over the years. Most notable is the missing central section of the Ziggurat Bar ceiling. Hayles and Howe is responsible for the remarkable work to invisibly repair these areas.

Of the five chandeliers over the auditorium, four have been relamped but remain aesthetically untouched, while the central one has been restored to its original blue and gold colour scheme with grant funding from Historic England.

The finances

Waltham Forest Council procured the building for £2.6 million and has reportedly spent upwards of £40 million on the capital works, against an original project budget of £19 million. The final figure is yet to be released.



Restoration of the original auditorium chandeliers

Photo: Waltham Forest Council

Project review

It has been over 15 years since Waltham Forest Council began making plans for Walthamstow's semi-derelict and much-loved Granada cinema, and, with the building now open and trading, it's customary to consider whether the capital works have been a success. In this case, that's a bit of a loaded question, as the implications of Brexit and Covid, including the hike in material costs, working restrictions and labour shortages, have had a significant impact, as did the multiple changes of key personnel throughout the extended duration of the project.

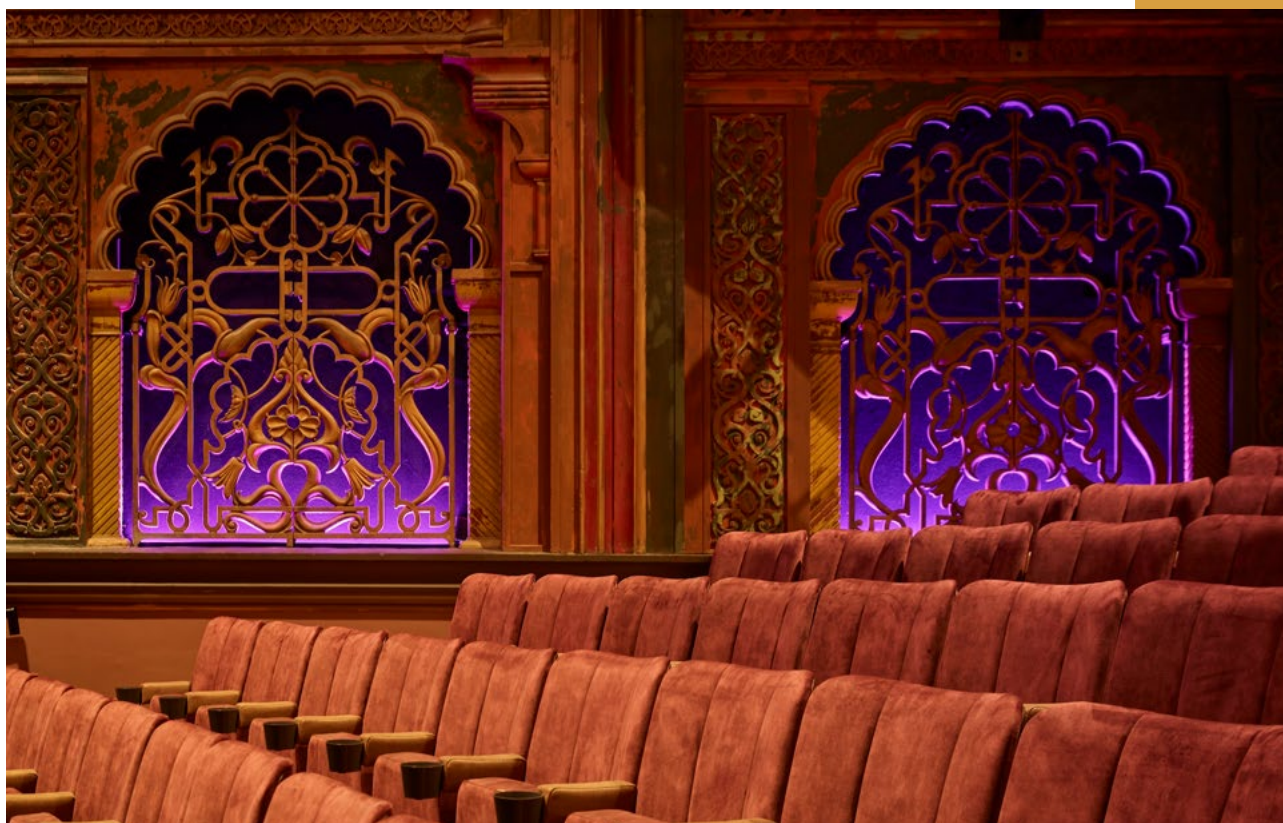
Was the project delivered on time? No. Was the project delivered on budget? No. Have the design, procurement and construction phases been flawless? Also, no. However, has one of the finest examples of Komisarjevsky's work been saved for the nation? Yes. Is there now a reimagined, iconic destination venue back in the heart of Walthamstow? Yes, and has the original vision, developed so long ago, been delivered, setting up Soho Theatre Walthamstow for an exciting, creative and viable future at the heart of the community? Most definitely, yes.

The client, the wider stakeholder group, and the community at large have responded overwhelmingly positively.

Showcase

Panel details

Photo:
David Levene





Dressing room Photo: David Levene

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan said, "I'm delighted that Soho Theatre Walthamstow has breathed new life into this historic London venue. With a world-class comedy line up alongside a creative programme for the local community, the theatre is set to become a huge asset – not just for Walthamstow but London as a whole. It's a fantastic legacy from Waltham Forest's year as my very first London Borough of Culture, and an excellent example of the power of culture to transform areas and inspire communities."

Cllr Rosalind Doré, Waltham Forest Cabinet member for Libraries, Culture and Sports and Leisure said, "We are delighted to announce the revival of our iconic venue, which

embodies our vision for Waltham Forest as a vibrant cultural neighbourhood."

Award-winning author and long-term restoration campaigner Liz Hyder has called the reopened venue a dream come true, explaining how it breathed new life into this unique building, transforming it into a welcoming venue, and that it was the perfect reward for those who worked to restore this jewel in Walthamstow's crown.

Plann was appointed by Waltham Forest Council to work alongside the in-house project director in a multi-faceted role, providing specialist expertise and support to the council executive and project teams, Soho Theatre and Willmott Dixon Interiors. For my part, it has been a long and bumpy road, but I wouldn't have missed it for anything. As with all capital projects, it was a team effort from start to finish, and I'm very proud to have been part of it. Over to you Soho Theatre Walthamstow.



Studio 1

Photo: David Levene

Project Data

Client

Waltham Forest Council

Operator

Soho Theatre

Concept architect

Ian Ritchie / Pilbrow & Partners

Construction architect

Bond Bryan

Interiors architectural design

Studio M

Interior design

JaneJaney

Theatre consultant

Theatre Projects / Charcoalblue

Structural engineer

AKS Ward

Services engineer

GDM Partnership

Fire engineer

Astute / Salus

Acousticians

AECOM / ALN Acoustics

Heritage consultant

Purcell

Access consultant

Buro Happold

Project director

Waltham Forest Council

Consultant project director

Plann / AECOM / Beehive

Project management

Waltham Forest Council / AECOM

Employers agent

Emmaus

Cost consultant

AECOM

Main contractor

Willmott Dixon Interiors / Willmott Dixon Construction

Showcase



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Epstein Theatre to Reopen



Epstein Theatre,
Liverpool

Photo: Ian Grundy

We warmly welcomed news in March that the Epstein Theatre in Liverpool is set to reopen later this year. A series of test events are happening throughout the spring and summer, culminating in the official grand reopening on English music entrepreneur and The Beatles' manager Brian Epstein's birthday, 19 September.

Constructed in 1913, the Epstein Theatre was originally conceived as a concert hall for instrumental recitals for the music shop it was built above before being converted into a theatre through expansion and construction of a fly tower and stage within a neighbouring building. Following its closure in 2023, we added the Grade II listed building to our Theatres at Risk Register and have been working since then to help find a way forward for this unique and beloved venue.

We are supportive of the Epstein's new operator, which is made up of a team with a long association with and experience of the venue. Theatres Trust's team undertook a site visit in June, and we were pleased to see the work that had gone into preparing the theatre for its opening and that the building's condition was good, despite a period of vacancy. It was reported that the programme was selling well, with events sold out, demonstrating the high regard local people have for this venue.

In the meantime, a planning application has been submitted for the conversion of the vacant upper levels of the building into short-stay accommodation. We are keen to see the whole building brought back into use, although at this stage we have raised some concerns because current plans would jeopardise the theatre's ongoing operation. The drawings are unclear and suggest that the necessary means of escape may be lost, and we have concerns around the transfer of noise to and from some units, which could disrupt performances or generate complaints from guests.

We are seeking to engage with the applicant to address and clarify those concerns and to help move the application forward while ensuring the Epstein Theatre has a bright, stable and viable future on its return to entertaining the people of Liverpool.

Keep up to date with our planning news and casework by signing up to our mailing list on our website:
theatretrust.org.uk/newsletter

Our Work

We provide advice on the planning and development of theatres.

New theatres and major developments

Theatres Trust actively supports theatre owners and operators who plan positively for cultural use and much of our advice is around ensuring proposals for theatres offer the most viable solution. Cultural facilities are increasingly recognised as vital for arresting decline and encouraging activity within town centres because they generate footfall and spending in other businesses.

The former **Saville Theatre** on Shaftesbury Avenue in London is vitally important as it offers the last remaining opportunity for a large-scale theatre in the world-renowned area known as Theatreland. Despite our strong objection, alongside other organisations including Historic England, Twentieth Century Society, SAVE Britain's Heritage, Covent Garden Community Association and Phoenix Gardens, Camden Council has resolved to approve planning permission for a scheme to convert the majority of the Grade II listed building into hotel use and relocate the theatre below ground (2024/0993/P). We have objected to similar schemes for this site in the past, and despite proactively engaging with the applicant, the plans do not sufficiently overcome our concerns or provide the best use of the building. While the applicant has promoted the scheme as

a 600-seat theatre, the reality is a 294-seat space tailored to the specific needs of Cirque du Soleil. To provide a 600-seat capacity venue would require additional WCs, exit routes and front-of-house space, and would be a costly undertaking at a later stage. We believe this is a missed opportunity to deliver something transformative for the building and the local area. A larger-scale theatre scheme is deliverable. Compared with the complexity and cost of this proposed scheme, a theatre project would be less risky, less disruptive, and provide significantly greater long-term cultural and economic benefits to Camden and the West End. Due to the scale and nature of the application, it must be referred to the Mayor of London, who can refuse the application, call it in for reconsideration, or allow the council's decision to stand. We are making our case to the Mayor, highlighting the importance and significance of this site and why we believe permission should be refused.

We were happy to support a planning application to develop and extend **The Maltings** in Berwick-upon-Tweed (25/00792/CCD). We were engaged in the project at pre-application stage, providing feedback to the project team on its plans to expand the theatre's facilities. Opening in 1990 in the remains of a 19th-century granary, The Maltings is an important



Saville Theatre London

Photo: Ian Grundy

The Maltings
Berwick-upon-Tweed



cultural facility for Berwick and its surrounding area. The project will create a more flexible main theatre space, improve front and back-of-house facilities, and add a new rehearsal studio and further community / cultural spaces. The building's modern upper level will be redeveloped with an additional storey, providing extra height above the new rehearsal space and a raised parapet around the rest of the building to conceal the necessary plant and equipment. The scheme will improve accessibility throughout the building. In the auditorium, wheelchair positions are proposed on either side of the stalls, with the flexibility for additional positions at the front, and a dedicated audio description and editing room will have a view of the stage. There will be new accessible WCs at every level and a Changing Places facility, best practice in accessible toilets.

Refurbishment, restoration and sustainability

Theatres Trust encourages theatre owners and operators to invest in their buildings to meet the needs and expectations of modern users and improve accessibility and sustainability to increase their viability and social value.

Theatres Trust is actively involved in the project to restore and revive Grade II* listed **Morecambe Winter Gardens** on our Theatres at Risk Register. Currently, the theatre is only open at stalls level, but the ambition is to fully reopen the theatre. We supported applications for planning permission and listed building consent (24/00844/FUL) - crucial next steps for this project. A former substation will be demolished, and a side extension will be added to the building. This will enable the circle level to be returned for use by providing additional WCs for a larger audience capacity, and the necessary escape routes. Accessibility will also be improved by installing an evacuation lift, ensuring safe access to the upper levels.

Grade II listed **Spilsby Theatre**, a former gaol and session house converted for theatre use, is another venue that Theatres Trust has been supporting since we added it to the Theatres at Risk Register in 2015. This recently included significant advice to the Spilsby Sessions House team ahead of its planning submission for a comprehensive restoration and refurbishment project (02123/25/FUL). We fully supported the proposals, which include general repairs, improving the venue's accessibility and repurposing outbuildings to provide an all-day café / bar, workspace and meeting rooms. This is a vital and much-needed next step in the project to bring Spilsby Theatre back to active use for its community. East Lindsey District Council unanimously approved both planning permission and listed building consent for the Spilsby Sessions House regeneration project at its planning committee meeting in early July.

We supported a listed building consent application (25/00141/LBC) to carry out internal alterations in the auditorium of the **Gallery Studio Theatre** in Ipswich. Operated by a local amateur theatre group, the theatre is housed within a Grade II listed former Salem Chapel. The work will include removing the current non-heritage seating block, slightly increasing the auditorium's capacity and creating space for wheelchairs. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to remove the remaining fixed section of the historic balcony, which will be documented and stored

Blackburn
Empire Theatre



appropriately. We believe that the public benefit of updating the auditorium, providing a better audience experience and ultimately keeping the theatre in active use far outweighs the harm to the building.

The **Blackburn Empire Theatre** opened as a cine-variety theatre in 1910 called Empire Electric Theatre. Like many theatres, it has undergone various changes of use (and name) before sufficient funds were raised in 2002 to restore the building as a theatre and arts centre. Today, it hosts a mixture of local amateur groups and professional touring productions, making it a valuable cultural asset for the Blackburn area. We were pleased to support a proposal to convert a vacant former office and storage building behind the theatre into dance and rehearsal studios (10/24/1130). This project will complement and enhance the Empire's community and cultural offer.

Grade II listed **Darwen Library Theatre** was built in 1908 as both a library and theatre, and is of architectural interest as a well-designed civic building. We were consulted on plans to refurbish the theatre, which include creating a new entrance and adding a two-storey extension (10/25/0295). The project aims to make the theatre a more welcoming destination outside of performance times, improve the connection between the library and theatre, and enhance the theatre's visibility and relationship with the rest of the town. We fully welcome the investment in this theatre. While we support the application, we also made some recommendations for further improvements, particularly drawing on our experience of similar projects at Storyhouse in Chester and BEAM in Hertford on how the theatre, library and front-of-house services could be better integrated.

We strongly support theatres and their operators in investing in environmental sustainability initiatives. Recently, we supported two applications for theatres to install solar panels on their buildings. Opening in 1968, **The Forum Theatre** in Billingham is significant as one of the first examples of a comprehensive community recreation centre in England, combining arts and sports provision within the same complex. It was Grade II listed in 2004 following a joint submission by Theatres Trust and Twentieth Century Society. The proposal (25/0667/LBC) will see photovoltaic (PV) panels installed on the roof of the complex, which will reduce the venue's costs and enhance its environmental sustainability. The panels will be shielded from view, with minimal visual impact. Similarly, permission was sought to install PV panels on the roof of the **Ellis Theatre** in Marlborough, Wiltshire (PL/2024/10775). The 416-seat theatre is part of Marlborough College but hosts local and touring productions alongside school performances. The panels will help the theatre and wider college reduce carbon emissions and lower energy costs.

Advice to support ongoing theatre operations

Theatres Trust's free Advice Service supports theatre owners, operators, local authorities and community groups to ensure their theatres remain vibrant and viable venues, fit for purpose in serving audiences, artists and communities.

We are proud to have played a key role in the ongoing campaign to protect **Bethnal Green Working Men's Club**, an iconic venue in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, predominantly serving the LGBTQ+ community and providing an important stage for the drag and cabaret sector. In 2024, the Committee of Bethnal Green Working Men's Club gave two months' notice to the venue's programmers to vacate, with the intention of selling the building to developers. In response, Friends of Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, a group formed of performers, customers, programmers and trade union members, has been campaigning to protect the club as a live performance venue and approached Theatres Trust for support. We advised the group on how the club's historic and current uses could be interpreted under planning legislation, namely that given its layout and usage, it should be considered a theatre. This played a significant role in Tower Hamlets Council confirming the venue's lawful use as a performance venue, nightclub and members' club. Local and national planning policies make it challenging for recognised arts and cultural facilities to be converted for other uses, in so doing providing Bethnal Green Working Men's Club with additional protection. We also gave fundraising and grant advice to the group, which will be vital if the venue returns to community ownership. While this is a positive development, we recognise that the venue has not yet been saved, and we will continue to support the campaign group, local authority, and any other interested parties in finding the best way forward.



Bethnal Green Working Men's Club

Seaton Town Council forced the immediate closure of **The Gateway** in Seaton, which it owns, in November 2024 due to outstanding fire inspection recommendations. Since the beginning of the year, Theatres Trust has been in conversation with both the council and theatre operator to help find a solution that would allow the building to reopen safely and protect the organisation's financial viability. We are pleased to report that the theatre reopened at the beginning of May.

Grade II listed **Cheltenham Playhouse** is an independent 180-seat venue based in the former Montpellier Baths. This year marks its 80th anniversary, but its future was uncertain due to short-term financial pressures. Although it is a council-owned building, the Playhouse receives no regular financial support from Cheltenham Borough Council. We provided fundraising advice to the operator, including ways to make a stronger case for support. In early June, the theatre received a £25,000 grant from the council, which should provide the financial security needed to stay open.

Theatres Trust provided unbiased expertise to support **Sherman Theatre** in Cardiff in selecting its new Artistic Director. With a focus on developing and producing new writing and nurturing Welsh and Wales-based artists, the theatre is a significant cultural and civic resource, and a key player in Wales's creative ecology. Swansea-born theatre director Francesca Goodridge impressed the interview panel with her passion, vision and commitment to bold storytelling and will take up the post in January 2026.

Beyond these examples, there is other ongoing sensitive casework on theatre operation issues, including business planning, fundraising, and lease negotiations. The details of these are confidential at the moment, but we will share them once they are resolved.

Developments affecting theatre buildings

Theatres Trust works with interested parties on projects involving former theatre buildings. We welcome proposals that return these buildings to live performance or other public use, or that retain significant architectural features. We also comment on developments adjacent to or adjoining theatre buildings where there is potential impact on the theatre.

We supported the application for retrospective planning permission for a change of use from a mixed-use dance studio and events space to include a place of worship and performing arts college at **Borough Hall** in Greenwich (25/0580/F). This Grade II listed venue is on our Theatres at Risk Register, has been closed since 2018 and needs some refurbishment and maintenance to bring it up to modern standards. The proposed plans show no alteration to the building or its internal layout, and the proposed uses are compatible with those of a theatre building. The place of worship use is restricted to Sundays, and we are familiar with the

operator, who manages services at other active theatres and performance venues, including the Dominion in London's West End, Fairfield Halls in Croydon and the Rep Theatre in Reading. We continue to believe that a return to full dedicated theatre use is possible in future, but in the meantime this constitutes a sensitive and compatible use of the building and we are pleased to see it being brought back into active use for the community.



Conversely, we objected to the application for a change of use to a place of worship for **Streatham Hill Theatre** (25/01141/FUL), also on our Theatres at Risk Register. A viability and economic impact assessment published in 2021 confirmed that restoration and phased reuse of the theatre as a leisure and entertainment venue would generate footfall, jobs, and stimulate economic growth, contributing over £70 million to the local economy over the next 30 years. Returning the building to cultural use would also align with Lambeth Council's published priorities and planning policy, and we are engaging with the council's culture and regeneration teams to discuss the opportunity of reopening the building as a theatre. We recognise that the applicant needs to find a suitable premises with the capacity to accommodate its congregation and believe there is a compromise solution whereby a mixed-use is granted, which both retains the building for cultural and leisure use and allows for the applicant's services.

Built in 1932 for use as both a theatre and cinema, the **Majestic Theatre** in Darlington has seen a number of uses over its lifetime. Theatre use has returned to the upper level of the building, using the former circle. The stalls area was previously used as a soft play centre, however, that business has recently vacated, and plans have been submitted to convert the downstairs into a 24-hour convenience store (25/00148/CU). We have not objected to this, provided that it does not impact the theatre's ongoing operations, specifically ensuring that routes into the venue are suitable and that the theatre's prominent signage is maintained.

Contact us if you are planning a capital project or want advice and guidance on maintaining your theatre building: advice@theatrestrust.org.uk



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Book Review

Charcoalblue

Designing for Performance

Hugh Pearman (Author)

David Lan (Foreword)

Lund Humphries (Publisher)

ISBN 9781848226616

Reviewed by Claire Appleby, Head of Theatre Buildings, Theatres Trust

The book can be purchased directly from Lund Humphries, priced £50.00

lundhumphries.com/products/charcoalblue



From fledgling theatre consultancy through to the established international practice that it is today, this book charts the 20-year history of Charcoalblue through an exploration of its theatre projects.

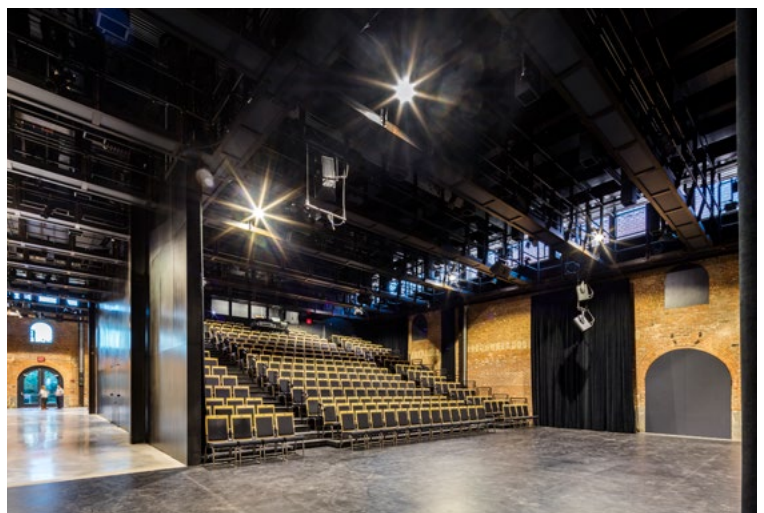
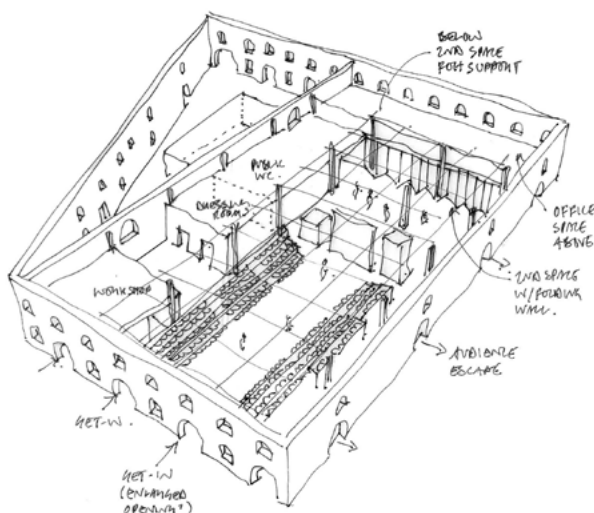
Rather than a chronological review, Pearman groups theatres by theme, selecting projects that highlight the breadth of the work that the practice has achieved in its relatively young existence. The featured projects serve to capture the essence and spirit of the Charcoalblue approach.

The chapter Adaptable Theatres covers the likes of **St Ann's Warehouse**, Brooklyn with its highly flexible 10,000 square foot main auditorium contained within the historic shell of a former tobacco factory (a project which helped establish Charcoalblue's international reputation) and the more recent commission of the industrial-scaled and highly adaptable **Aviva Studios** in Manchester. In contrast, Hidden Gems covers lesser-known projects, including the 350-seat, modest-budget **Horris Hill School Theatre** in Newbury, and the practice's first commission the **Siobhan Davies Studios**, a low-budget, flexible-spaced contemporary dance academy formed from an old school in south London. The chapter Temporary Theatres features, among others, the **Courtyard Theatre** in Stratford-upon-Avon (another early commission). Built as a full-scale working model of the new auditorium in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, its design tests a new connectivity between actor – audience, and new staging opportunities. Then there's Theatrical Transformations which includes what was achieved at **Alexandra Palace**

in Wood Green, London and a chapter adeptly named Crazy Adventures featuring projects like the conversion of the West End's **Playhouse Theatre** to the Kit Kat Club and, across the pond, Broadway's **Lyric Theatre** where the auditorium has been reshaped and adapted for the staging of Harry Potter and the Cursed Child. And, of course, the book touches on the technical with chapters on acoustics and the consultancy's parallel venture, Charcoalblue Experience (CBX).

Pearman's enthusiasm and passion for the theatres and his admiration for Charcoalblue's sophisticated design and technological achievements spring from the pages. Chapters are richly illustrated with concept sketches, site photos, 3-D imagery and sleek photography of the finished spaces. There's even a pop-up **National Theatre Shed** – what's not to like?! And then there's the personal touch, as the book includes images of staff, both past and present, from the four fresh-faced founders outside the Young Vic, through to photos of the large staff team that Charcoalblue is today.

There is a limit to the detail that a book covering such a breadth of projects can deliver, but Pearman's text provides a well-judged balance between context, design and completed project. The focus goes beyond the architecture, capturing the ambition and dynamism of the spaces that Charcoalblue has helped create, and reflecting the synergy between design team and client. It is a true celebration of some of the outstanding theatre projects of the last few decades – a book for all who love a theatre building.



St Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn Sketch: Gavin Green Photo: David Sundberg / Esto