

CASEWORK REPORT: March 2010

GRANADA, Hoe Street, Walthamstow, London Cecil Masey and Theodore Komisarjevsky, 1930, Grade II*

Following our site visit in December, we have written another letter to the local authority, this time with specific comments on the still live planning application to change the cinema to a place of worship.

The plans show that the majority of the historic fabric will either be repaired or restored. It is also the intention of the applicants to provide disabled access. But this is proposed with unnecessary damage to the historic fabric.

The application shows the route of the disabled access from the street via a new Sesame access platform lift built into the outside stairs at the main entry point to the cinema foyer. In order to be able to access all areas of the church facility on their various levels a doorway is created by breaking through the wall at the left of the foyer where there is currently an ornate mirror. From there a new circulation space is reached that links to a new disabled lift. This is the key access point for disabled people to the stalls and balcony levels of the auditorium as well as to the ancillary facilities such as the Training Centre and Kids Zone on the ground floor and the Youth Centre and Upper Café at first floor level.

The creation of the access from the foyer to the new circulation space and lift are problematic because they do irreversible damage to the historic fabric of the foyer which without doubt forms an important part of the interior architectural significance. The new doorway is a major intervention and there is an easy way to provide access without doing all this damage.

We have suggested that the street access to the proposed Youth Centre that is located just next to the cinema entrance and now leads up to the public house be used for disabled people to get into the building. The location of this entrance is ideally situated and not out of the way or at the back of the building. Doing this would be a much more sensitive approach. The corridor reached from this door leads directly to the new circulation space with its lift. The main foyer could still be accessed by disabled persons via the platform lift as proposed. They would not have to break through the wall to achieve this.

But just in case the planners do not agree and insist that the proposed route is acceptable we have suggested the creation of a "jib" door on the foyer side of the proposed new doorway: the original moulding could be left in place (or recreated) and it would flush with, and decorated to match the wall it is set in for the purpose of concealment. In other words a "hidden door" that looks like a piece of the wall, without a doorframe. Still we hope that they will go with the new access route.

Apollo Theatre formerly GAUMONT PALACE, Queen Caroline Street, Hammersmith, London

Robert Cromie, 1932, Grade II*

In January we were tipped off that there were plans to remove the apron stage. The local authority had not directly consulted us which was very disappointing as this is a Grade II* listed cinema. We feel we can be most pro-active if we are consulted early on. Pre-application discussions are especially valuable and can help produce a scheme that is acceptable without prolonged modifications and negotiation.

In this case this surely would have been true because the application did not address at all the wonderful original organ console that is still there. The Design and Heritage Statement was completely inadequate. It was not even half a page long and the drawings were not very good either. The organ console did not exist for this application although the proposed removal of the apron stage would affect the organ console that is just there.

While organs used to be common to accompany film shows in the early days of silent films, they have now become rare and only a few survive at all in their original location. Many that are still in situ are not playable or are not within a listed cinema and therefore are not protected. Below is the short list of the 13 surviving cinema buildings in England that along with the Apollo (Gaumont Palace) in Hammersmith still do have their organs:

- Granada, Tooting, London, Grade I
- Gaumont State, Kilburn, Grade II*
- Plaza, Stockport, Grade II*
- Granada, Walthamstow, London, Grade II*
- State, Grays, Grade II*
- Regal, Uxbridge, Grade II*
- Dreamland, Margate, Grade II*
- New Gallery, Oxford Street, Westminster, London, Grade II
- Odeon, Weston Super-Mare, Grade II
- Granada, Harrow, Grade II
- Cameo, Regent St, London, Grade II (part of Regent Street Listing)
- Odeon, Leicester Square, Westminster, London, unlisted
- Majestic, Cradley Heath, unlisted

If we consider that at their peak there were approximately 4,800 cinemas in Britain in 1949, of which about 500 had organs, the rarity of the 14 remaining cinemas that still have managed somehow to retain much of their original glory is magnified.

The drawings showed that the new stage line was to come about half way through the current organ lift cage and therefore the cage would need to be removed. All mechanical components of the lift workings are actually housed below the current orchestra pit floor level so ought not to be effected. However, any changes to the stage area would need to accommodate the means of getting

the organ console on or off the lift platform safely as well as storing the console when not in use. It is vital that the organ lift is not rendered unusable - whilst not being the actual original lift, it was built to directly replace it and is in the original position.

The dramatic effects of an original organ being played and rising from the orchestra pit are still enjoyed today as part of this historic building. This feature is still in use and therefore should not be rendered obsolete by an application in order to maximize seating capacities.

We also understand that contrary to the Design and Heritage Statement, the orchestra pit itself *is* original to the building. Only the apron stage was added at a later date. It is therefore important that the method of extending the stalls floor over the pit is not done in a destructive manner.

We have suggested that the console remains on the lift at all times and is boxed in around its back. The lift platform sits at orchestra pit level, which is about 3ft below stalls floor level, so this would be possible, even if a few seats are left out at that position. Care will need to be taken to ensure that provisions are made to protect the console from damage.

STATE, George Street, Grays, Essex FGM Chancellor, 1938, Grade II*

As reported last year, the Thames Thurrock Gateway Development Corporation are now taking the sad plight of the State more seriously and have instigated a study to try to arrive, officially, at what could be done with it. To this end Richard Gray attended in early February a 'Stakeholder Workshop' in the Thurrock Learning Shop, formerly the Post Office opposite the cinema.

This 'workshop' appeared to be part of the process of trying to arrive at what to do and its findings would, we were told, be fed into the inevitable feasibility study, with the idea of this being adopted as the local policy for the building's future. It was like one of dreadful training days, which we have all sat (or snored) through, where, to wake you up, you have to do something and think rather than just listen to someone waffling on. Anyway, here there were two tables surrounded by all who have wrung their hands over what might be done to save the State, although a notable, and unfortunate omission was the presence of the owner, who will surely have the final say, so our deliberations may in the end be described as merely mulling it all over to the accompaniment of tepid tea and chocolate digestives.

The options for the poor old thing ranged from 'do nothing but make it watertight' to flooring it in as a jewellery mart, which someone had seen happen to one of the downtown Los Angeles movie palaces. A more moderate route was to consider ways of using it for performing arts with occasional film (which we have been suggesting all along) with as little intervention to the fabric as possible,

although it did include rebuilding the lower block to the left of the entrance tower thereby creating more small-scale useable spaces (the idea of turning this portion into an hotel has now been discredited as being both uneconomic and too damaging).

Anyway, Alan Baxter's report will soon be out but the whole thing might be binned if the owner in the end does not like these options. All that can be said now is that at least the TTGDC is more concerned and something has happened, however tenuous, rather than nothing.

GAUMONT PALACE, Corporation Street, Taunton, Somerset William T. Benslyn, 1932, Grade II

We have been contacted by a strong local campaign group who have asked for our support. Their eventual goal is to get the building back to entertainment use. This excellent historic cinema is now still being run as a bingo hall. With bingo numbers declining seriously since the smoking ban was enforced, it is a really good and proactive approach to think about what is to become of the building should it eventually close like so many others.

The Gaumont Palace was built as a cinema in 1932 with a seating capacity of 1,476. With the decline of cinema the building closed as a film venue in 1981 and was reopened for bingo the same year.

The group has decided to lead from the front and are doing everything to have the local authority include the building's potential as a venue theatre and performing arts venue in their local policy. Should the building indeed have to close and be put on the market this policy would give potential purchasers clear guidance as to suitable use options. While the building is still open we now consider it at risk.

We understand that there is a need regionally for a lyric theatre, meaning a theatre that can accommodate touring productions and an audience of between 700 and 1,500. The Gaumont Palace would be ideally positioned for this purpose and its amazing interior would once again be accessible to the general public for entertainment. Theatres and performing arts facilities are considered as actively fostering regeneration and are conducive to creating and sustaining a thriving entertainment and recreational district within the urban setting. While there is an existing theatre in Taunton, the seating capacity of the Brewhouse Theatre is too small to accommodate larger shows. The economic benefits in terms of drawing visitors to Taunton from the outlying regions are a strong point in favour of this effort to bring back the building for entertainment.

We have written to the council supporting this excellent campaign and wish them much luck!

BARBER'S ELECTRIC PALACE, 63 Stratford Road, Wolverton, Buckinghamshire 1911, unlisted

There is a move by local groups to reopen this historic cinema for film shows again! There is a lot of goodwill and public support for this and Richard Gray and Eva Branscome were invited to Wolverton for a site visit and to provide expert advice.

It is an example of Edwardian cinema architecture made interesting by its 'reverse' planning (stage/screen at the street end, which is not unknown in early cinema design but is uncommon - the Phoenix, East Finchley originally had the same feature), and the fact that it was clearly ambitious, being a double-height space with a balcony and side slips as either entry or emergency exit routes. The latter feature is very much that of theatre planning, which we have not previously seen in an early cinema. There is not much decorative detail, externally, on the facade, or internally in the form of fibrous plaster. But the wrought iron support of the balcony and balcony arms are unusual and rare.

It would certainly be worthwhile for someone to carry out architectural research on Barber's other cinemas of which there were several locally and often within bicycling distance from each other so that the film reels could be quickly whisked from one venue to the other. We were driven to the former Scala, Wolverton Road, Stony Stratford and there are others in the Stoke-on-Trent area. This would help place the Palace in an architectural context and some pattern, even if only in planning quirks would emerge. This early circuit is certainly of sociological interest.

PRESS Coverage

Cinemas at Risk

We are very pleased to have received a lot of press attention in the last few weeks. First an article in the Independent on Sunday on 31 January and then as a spin off of this Richard Gray could be seen live and in action and spreading the news nationally on how important historic cinemas are on The One Show on 5 February. Have a look if you have not seen it already:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cinemas-golden-age-reaches-the-final-reel-1884537.html>

SHORT CAMPAIGNING UPDATES

ODEON (former OXFORD), Magdalen Street, Oxford Frank Matcham & Co and J. C. Leeds; 1924; Grade II

We have made a photographic record of the excellent expanding and retracting new screen at the Electric, Portobello Road, west London. It grows out of the original proscenium which is really ingenious because original prosceniums are

so very rare in working cinemas. The Odeon/Oxford still has such a proscenium. When Odeon put in a proposal to build a new and much wider screen in front of it earlier last year we had recommended that they contact the Electric and have a look at the expandable screen there. It was very difficult to describe, but now we have suitable photographs.