

Civic Theatre – Darlington

A Project Brief

1. Introduction

1.1 This document is intended to create a project brief for the appointed Design Team who will take this through from commencement to RIBA Stage B. Thereafter the proposal will be submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund and if successful, a full design team will be procured to take the project through to construction and completion.

1.2 The main stakeholders in the project are Darlington Borough Council (DBC) who own the freehold of the building and currently operate it successfully as a touring theatre venue.

1.3 This document has been created as a collaboration between Client (DBC) and the Design Team. It is the output of meetings and a workshop which specifically looked at the shortcomings and aspirations of a revitalised theatre. It therefore defines a collective vision for the building when it reopens and identifies specifically how the restored building will function for both twenty-first century audiences, performers and technicians.

1.4 It is essential that there is a collective understanding and ownership of the content of this document in order to ensure that design omissions or gaps do not develop at a later date.

2. Primary Intended Use

2.1 The Client anticipates that the theatre will continue to be operated and managed by Darlington Borough Council. The primary intended use is for high quality touring theatre product typically represented by a mixed programme of:

- Musicals, opera and operetta
- Christmas pantomime
- Theatre for children and education
- Ballet and contemporary dance

Civic Theatre – Project Brief

- One-night entertainments
- Community Groups e.g. Darlington Operatic Society
- Drama

2.2 DBC does not anticipate a significant change in the type of production to be staged at the theatre. The building is simply required to work more efficiently and harder, with an increased gross box office potential.

2.3 This being the case the fit-out and equipment specifications of the theatre will be tailored accordingly. It is crucial to understand that this brief is written on this basis and that the presentation of large scale musicals will not be possible as there are inherent fundamental limitations with the building which cannot be resolved without huge capital investment which is outside the scope of the current project. Such interventions would require an enlargement of the auditorium (which would be highly controversial as a listed building) and large scale reconstruction of the stage house.

2.4 The next section of this document deals exclusively with performance parameters and technical equipment specifications. It is by definition prescriptive and has been developed through discussions with DBC.

2.5 The Client and Design Team have also identified opportunities for a significant degree of potential additional usage for the building. In order to achieve this output it will be essential to provide facilities to support:

- Education and activity space for all ages
- Opportunity for interpretation and heritage awareness throughout the building
- An improved customer experience which encourages repeat visits
- An opportunity for the community to meet and interact outside traditional theatre hours

• 3. External Public Realm Issues

3.1 External public realm and streetscape issues are currently under consideration by DBC. The capital costs associated with these changes will be met from other funding sources and do not form part of the capital budget associated with this project.

3.2 General removal and tidying of all street furniture

3.3 Physical access into the theatre needs to be drastically improved. The old entrance, which is now under used needs to be re-evaluated. The present entrance in Borough Road, provides an inadequate “back door” approach to the theatre and misses an opportunity to create a sense of welcome and arrival.

3.4 The present box office is contained within a separate adjoining shop unit which provides no direct physical internal linkage with the theatre.

3.5 There is a lack of drop off points for cars, coaches and disabled patrons adjacent to the theatre

3.6 The shutters which are drawn across the old main entrance, the isolation of the box office and the “back door” entrance approach to the theatre all contribute towards creating an unwelcoming and difficult arrival experience. The aspiration is to resolve these issues of both internal connectivity and external welcome to create a single welcoming identity from Parkgate. This is likely to involve the integration of the box office within new foyers, the reworking of the old entrance to make it more accessible whilst making the Parkgate elevation far more transparent and welcoming. This is likely to involve significant internal rearrangements to both the existing box-office, dressing rooms, and the old main entrance areas. There may also be a need to acquire adjoining space not currently within the present ownership.

3.7 External floodlighting which integrates with the new street-lighting scheme is fundamental to achieving a welcoming and inviting atmosphere in the evening. The reintroduction of historic light fittings on both the external canopy and the main elevations is likely to make a significant impact upon the streetscape as a whole.

3.8 Sensitive high-quality signage designed to integrate with the historic elevations is a fundamental requirement of the scheme.

3.9 The original historic cast iron canopy is now a mere shadow of its former self. By reinstating the original design, complete with light fittings, hanging baskets, signage and glazing, the theatre will once again be provided with a focus for pavement activity prior to entering the restored building. Many other theatre restoration schemes have found this to be both practical and visually stunning e.g. Buxton Opera House, Gaiety Theatre Isle of Man and Royal Hall Harrogate.

4. Front of House Facilities

4.1 The current foyers, both old and new (1990s) fail to deliver a successful scheme of public circulation. The new extension is inherently flawed because it introduced half levels into an already access challenged theatre. This coupled with the fact that there is no public lift within the building creates a very difficult audience visitor experience. Many patrons simply stay in their seats during the interval rather than attempting to get a drink from one of the bars. In consequence the theatre is constantly losing potential income generation.

4.2 The Design Team are therefore required to examine in detail the options for front of house configuration. At this point in time nothing should be ruled out including, if necessary the demolition of the new foyers.

4.2 In an attempt to alleviate some of these problems the Conservatory Bar was added to the ground floor. However it is far too small to serve the stalls with a capacity of 400. Once again demolition may be the only option.

4.3 The existing toilet facilities are wholly inadequate in terms of both quantity and quality. These need to be brought up to modern standards whilst making further provision for accessible toilets on all levels.

4.4 The redesign of the foyer spaces needs to take account of long term revenue implications on staffing requirements. Current arrangements require 8-10 ushers to be in post at every performance, enhanced further by bar and kiosk staff.

4.5 The current location of the sweet kiosk and merchandising causes major circulation problems located as it is almost immediately inside the new entrance in Borough Road.

4.6 There is a general lack of storage throughout the front of house areas.

4.7 There is no requirement in future for a large kitchen facility.

5. Auditorium

5.1 The whole ventilation strategy for the auditorium needs to be re-evaluated. It is currently extremely stuffy within the auditorium, and during a performance the temperature quickly rises to an uncomfortable level. The present services are inadequate for a building of this kind and it is envisaged that they will all be replaced.

5.2 When the stalls were re-seated in the 1990s the central aisle was removed in order to divide the seating into three blocks with two aisles. In consequence the two outer seating blocks were moved against the outer walls of the auditorium. The resultant sightlines are very poor and it is suggested that this area should revert back to a central aisle format.

5.3 Leg room is considered to be somewhat limited in the dress circle. The existing tiering at this level is cast in concrete. It is therefore unlikely that this can be significantly altered but the Design Team are required to examine the possibilities to improve the comfort for patrons in this area. The client would also wish if practicable to introduce an additional row of seats at the rear of the dress circle.

5.4 The upper circle was re-tiered in the 1980s when the level was reopened to the public. This resulted in an increased steepness and the introduction of ugly invasive handrails which detract from the ambience of the space. The Design Team are asked to examine the possibilities of reverting back to the original tiering, reducing the visual impact of the handrails, and if at all possible increasing the seating capacity within the tier.

5.5 It is envisaged that all existing seats will be replaced with new heritage style seating.

5.6 In a restored Civic Theatre DBC would wish to celebrate the historic nature of the building returning wherever practicable and possible lost features and finishes. Such reversions will need to be compatible with modern requirements whilst still retaining the historic nature of the building.

5.7 The main ceiling has lost its original central sunburner used to both ventilate and light the auditorium. The reinstatement of this lost feature is considered to be an important element of the auditorium's restoration. Similarly lost fibrous plasterwork features, mainly on the auditorium ceiling should be reinstated.

5.8 The existing front of house lighting positions are essential but rather more intrusive than need be. Solutions need to be examined to provide for a more subtle and less invasive appearance.

5.9 Interventions have been made into the rear back wall of the stalls in order to accommodate wheelchair accommodation and the technical control room. This whole area needs to be re-examined in order to create a more sensitive appearance.

6. Backstage Facilities

6.1 The dressing rooms are located along the side of the auditorium facing onto Parkgate. Whilst all the dressing rooms have daylight and face onto Parkgate they are in very poor condition and are spread at a number of different levels accessed by steep stairs. Toilet and shower facilities are extremely poor. This whole area needs complete re-evaluation, it may be preferable to relocate the facilities elsewhere on the site.

6.2 No Green Room is currently provided for artists and technicians. This needs to be addressed.

6.3 The present location of the wardrobe is impractical being too far away from the get-in and generally inaccessible for large hampers and cases.

6.4 There is no company office for visiting companies. This needs to be provided within the new scheme.

6.5 The current stage door access from Parkgate is extremely limited. Once again there are access issues, and lack of facilities for the stage door-keeper.

6.6 The present box office location in Parkgate provides an independent space for ticket purchase. It does not afford direct access into the theatre. The whole spacial relationship associated with ticket purchase needs to be re-examined in detail.

6.7 The main theatre offices are located on the first and second floors directly above the box office. This building was originally intended for domestic occupation and so offices are effectively in spaces once intended for bedrooms and associated living areas. The offices are accessed by a domestic staircase and the datum levels within this portion of the building bear no relationship to any levels within the theatre. There appear to be a number of internal structural issues which also need to be examined. Thermal insulation is poor and services are generally very poor.

6.8 An area which once formed the back yard of the box offices premises has been roofed over in recent times to provide additional accommodation for the technical staff. This single storey building is extremely constrained and very limiting.

7. Technical Facilities

7.1 The stage house has changed relatively little since its original construction. In consequence there are severe operational constraints which limit the potential of the productions that can be staged. The whole of this area therefore requires a full reappraisal. Issues which need to be considered are as follows:

- Stage left wing is limited for space
- Wagon access to the dock door is set at right angles
- No weather protection for unloading
- Dock doors draughty
- Poor ventilation onstage – drafts often run across the stage
- Location of electrical incomer and distribution not ideal
- Ventilation plant takes up space in scene dock
- Dimmer racks and technical infrastructure needs replacing
- Grid slats are too wide apart
- Rear scene dock is structurally unstable
- Flying system still operated as a “hemp house”
- Stage house trusses under-boarded with straw board
- Location of front of house Control Room causes operational problems
- Understage suffers from water ingress
- Understage used for storage with limited headroom
- Orchestra pit arrangements, floor, forestage arrangements need reassessing
- Height of grid was highlighted by technical staff as limiting
- Safety curtain too far upstage – limits position of LX1
- Rear stage workshop, tea room etc not fit for purpose

- Current use of telescope access to be reviewed

8. Services

8.1 The service infrastructure within the building needs to be completely replaced. Issues which need to be addressed include:

- Ventilation approach for the whole site – natural ventilation is an aspiration
- Location of plant rooms
- Wireless Internet throughout the building
- Integrated internal telephone system
- Security linked handset/headset systems for technicians and staff
- CCTV throughout the building
- FOH paging facility
- Fire alarms system – aspirated system in all historic areas
- Monitor and voice paging systems
- Integrated show relay sound and vision
- BMS system accessed via building computer infrastructure
- Intumescent cable pathways through designated fire compartments
- Lockable cable troughs between mixing positions at the rear of the stalls and the stage
- Emergency lighting – using a 240v battery cubicle and inverter system
- Potential rain water harvesting for non-potable water

8.2 Specific attention needs to be given to:

- Revenue running costs of the whole site post-restoration
- Sustainability

- “Green Issues” in both construction and operation
- Simplicity of operation for all plant

9. Site Issues

9.1 The site has evolved since the theatre was originally constructed. The acquisition of the box office premises and the construction of the new extension facilities in Borough Road have impacted significantly upon the way in which the theatre operates. The time has now come to reappraise the whole site and to create a strategic plan which will secure the long term security and well being of the theatre. Issues which need to be considered include:

- Land acquisition for improved get-in facilities
- Consideration given to the acquisition of the Ambulance Station in Borough Road to provide additional office, storage and education facilities
- Consideration given to the acquisition of the two shops which adjoin the existing box office premises in Parkgate
- Consideration given to the long term use and relationship of the 1990s extension including the Conservatory Bar
- Consideration to be given to the streetscape and the theatre’s relationship within Parkgate

10. Access Issues

10.1 Fundamental problems of access are inherent throughout the existing building. The Design Team are required to address these issues in order to make the building a far friendlier space for all patrons.

10.2 The original entrance on Parkgate has three large steps making access difficult for many. In consequence a new level access was created in Borough Road, but this is far from ideal as it has created public flow issues within the whole front of house space.

10.3 The 1980s extension created more access issues than it solved. It was constructed at a half level commensurate with none of the original levels within the auditorium and the whole problem was further compounded by the complete absence of a public lift.

10.4 It is recognised that a listed building on a sloping site will inevitably have access issues which will need to be addressed in any proposed development work. The problems are particularly challenging for this building and in consequence the Design Team need to focus specifically on resolving where practical as many of these issues as possible.