

CHESTER ODEON HERITAGE STATEMENT: CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY RESPONSE

Summary

The Society continues to support the principle of the reuse of the former Odeon cinema as a cultural venue. The Heritage Statement and supporting archaeological desk-based assessment are welcomed as a sound basis for understanding the importance of the standing building and below-ground archaeology. The subsequent decisions on the adaptation of the building will necessarily be complicated and will also have to take into account other aspects of the proposed Northgate development.

Detailed comments

- 1.0 The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes the opportunity to take part in consultations over this project. Not only is the former Odeon cinema an important building in its own right but it sits in one of the most conspicuous locations in the city centre. The manner and purpose of any redevelopment is likely to be with us for a century or more and will form a major part of the legacy by which the present generation of the civic leaders and active citizens of Chester will be judged. It is of the greatest importance, therefore, to get it right.

The initial comments of the Society's Council are as follows:

2.0 The Heritage Statement & Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment

- 2.1 We think that the Heritage Statement is a methodologically sound piece of work thoroughly carried out, and we agree with its value judgements both on the building and the options for future use.
- 2.2 We have also reviewed the desk-based archaeological assessment. Again we think that this is a sound piece of work that has been fairly summarised in the Heritage Statement. We would only disagree with it in suggesting that perhaps the Roman remains in this part of the city have an international rather than a national importance. The fact of the matter is that we simply do not yet understand the function of the very unusual large courtyard building which partly underlies the southern part of the Odeon and which was the origin of the open space that survives today as Town Hall or Market Square. Still less do we understand the east-west aligned building that underlies the northern part of the Odeon and Commerce House. The study of legionary fortresses has ramifications across all the former provinces and the empire, and so the understanding of these buildings will make an important contribution to Roman military studies generally. Thus, whether the Roman archaeology underlying the Odeon and adjoining areas is preserved or excavated, it should be treated with the greatest respect.
- 2.3 We should also like to point out that sites in this part of Chester frequently produce organic remains (both artefactual and environmental) in very localised waterlogged deposits. These are generally rare in Chester and are therefore of particular interest.

3.0 *The Implications for the Building and Site of Reuse as a Theatre*

- 3.1 Returning to the Odeon building, it is clear that the eastern and southern facades are the most important parts of the exterior, together with, especially, the staircase, upper foyer and front of the auditorium in the interior.
- 3.2 As the Heritage Statement makes clear, the ideal solution would be to return the building to use as a cinema, as this would require the least modification externally, internally or below ground, and would logically encourage the straightforward restoration of the damage done by modifications from the 1970s onwards.
- 3.3 If the Council is minded to pursue its stated intention of converting the building for use as a theatre (and in principle we strongly support the construction of a theatre in the city centre), we presume that this will require considerable extension and modification (see, for example, Cllr Stuart Parker on the use of the Commerce House site for a fly tower, as reported in *The Standard*, 9 August 2012, p 9).
- 3.4 Any extension would certainly have an impact on the below-ground archaeology. We have already rehearsed its importance, and given that it lies less than 1.50 m below ground we cannot see how significant damage can be avoided. If there are waterlogged remains on the site, even if they were to be left undisturbed, it is possible that changes to groundwater conditions as a result of new construction would soon lead to their destruction.
- 3.5 A fly tower would presumably be a structure of considerable height and bulk. Accommodating such a structure comfortably among the generally low-rise buildings in the centre of Chester would be a challenge. One has only to think of the way that the present Commerce House unpleasantly dominates this area of the city when seen close to, and the skyline of the city centre as a whole when seen from further afield.
- 3.6 We would be very wary of any proposals to tamper with the existing southern and eastern facades or the surviving original internal features, all of which are very carefully designed. Any changes, not to mention additions to the structure, would need to be devised by an architect of the highest quality with a real sympathy and understanding of Art Deco and a very sure touch, and carried out to a very high standard.

4.0 *The Wider Implications of Reuse as a Theatre*

- 4.1 Self-evidently, a decision to adapt the Odeon building for use as a theatre would rule out its future use as a cinema. A cinema is another cultural facility that is currently lacking in Chester city centre, and it is to be regretted that no aspiration for one is mentioned in the final draft of the One City Plan (although it does appear in Appendix 2 of the Plan). At the moment residents have to go to the Greyhound Park or Cheshire Oaks. There is speculation that the cinema on the Greyhound Park could move to the Broughton Shopping Park. The Local Plan Preferred Policy Direction document issued in July 2012 recognises the damage being done to established urban centres by Cheshire Oaks; in our view this damage includes leisure facilities as well as retail, and the same judgement could be made of all out-of-town centres. We therefore consider that it is important, both for residents' convenience and for the attractiveness of the city centre, for a cinema to be re-established in the centre of Chester, and we are pleased to see the aspiration to have a multiplex cinema as part of the Northgate development stated in the Council's press release of 15 February 2012. However, we should feel

more comfortable if plans to convert the Odeon building to a theatre were developed as a part of a 'cultural package' for the city centre which included a cinema.

- 4.2 We are also aware that consideration is being given to accommodating the library on the same site as the proposed theatre (to allow transfer of the market to the present library site?). Without seeing plans we are sceptical as to whether this can be achieved without considerable downsizing of the library, which we would strongly oppose. Chester's library is small for a city of its size, and it should be remembered that what was actually built about 1980 was only a part of what was originally intended. Rather we think the Council should consider something more ambitious, along the lines of the 'Hive' at Worcester (<http://www.thehiveworcester.org/>), which houses not only the public library, but also the county record office, archaeology service and parts of the university library. We pointed out the lack of synergy between these services in Cheshire in our response to the first draft of the One City Plan. Again, we should feel more comfortable if plans to convert the Odeon building to a theatre were developed as part of a package, so that the 'knock-on' effects can be seen.

We hope that you will find these comments helpful and look forward to seeing how the project develops.

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