

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY¹

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED ALTERATIONS TO ODEON CINEMA AND CONSTRUCTION OF NEW THEATRE ON COMMERCE HOUSE SITE (APPLICATION 14/02792/FUL)

Summary

- *The Society has consistently supported the principles of the reuse of the former Odeon cinema as a cultural venue and of the construction of a theatre in Chester city centre. However, it has also from the start pointed out the significant damage to buried archaeology of the highest importance that would result from the reuse of the Commerce House site for the latter purpose.*
- *Realising the construction of this civic asset will only be achieved through the loss of a higher percentage of archaeological remains than is nowadays considered acceptable. Structural design and working methods on site must be refined and controlled to ensure that this percentage does not grow any higher.*
- *Such a high percentage of loss must not be regarded as a precedent for what is acceptable elsewhere in the city, for example on the site of the Northgate development.*
- *Despite these strictures, the Society welcomes the incorporation of a community archaeology element in the excavation programme and would be keen to be involved.*
- *We accept that the general massing and scale of the new building are unavoidable and are generally supportive of its general external form and materials. However, we consider it important that aspects of the detailed design should be improved to harmonise with the delicacy of the Odeon and other neighbouring buildings. The decorative brickwork on the flytower should be extended to the west and north sides, which will also be clearly visible, and the box-like thrust of the studio/bar in a dark metal cladding should be refined in design and materials to be less domineering.*

Detailed comments

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 We stand by our previous comments on this project (http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/CAS_PlanConsult12_TheatreDevelopment_OdeonHeritageStatement_PC_comments_13-08-12.pdf; http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/CAS_PlanConsult14_ChesterCulturalCentre_PC_comments_V02_10-05-14.pdf), in that we strongly support the construction of a city-centre theatre and cinema but have concerns about the degree of archaeological destruction and the architectural sensitivity that will be required, not to mention the practicality of accommodating an adequate city library in the same complex. However, here we wish to focus on just a few aspects of the project.

2.0 Archaeology

- 2.1 The site lies in [Character Zone 2](#) as defined in the Chester Archaeological Database. Under 'Key Considerations' it states: 'This zone is a key area within the Area of Archaeological Importance, and planning and development here should be approached with particular sensitivity to the high potential for significant archaeological remains of at least a national level'. This is a Primary Archaeological Character Zone, as defined in the [Chester Archaeological Plan](#) (page 15) and therefore Guidance Note 2 (page 16)

¹ The Chester Archaeological Society was founded in 1849, and from its inception it has campaigned not only for the proper care of archives, archaeology, and historic buildings but for sympathetic, high-quality new design. See <http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/about.html>.

applies to development there. Paragraph 33 states: 'developments that are likely to have a significant adverse impact on heritage assets of national and regional significance and their settings will not be permitted unless that impact can be avoided and the archaeological remains are preserved *in situ*'.

- 2.2 Specifically, the site overlies an area at the heart of the Roman legionary fortress that remains poorly understood: on the south side of the Odeon, the north range of the large courtyard that underlies the Town Hall Square and the buildings to its west; on the Commerce House site, the north wall of the enclosure that underlies the present Bus Exchange. Further north lies a narrow east–west building block whose existence has only recently been confirmed by trial excavations and whose function is wholly obscure. There is also the possibility of finding the remains of Saxon occupation on the site. Given that so many remains of international importance were destroyed between the 1960s and 1980s and that the investigations that were carried out on them remain unpublished (and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future), it is imperative to minimise further losses and to ensure that the results of any new excavations are properly analysed and published.
- 2.3 We understand that the architects have had detailed discussions with successive CWaC planning archaeologists and representatives of English Heritage about the impact of the groundworks on the buried remains. The archaeological project design prepared by Earthworks Archaeological Services calculates that 5.31% of significant archaeology on site will be destroyed (http://194.187.35.179/Planning/lg/GFPlanningDocuments.page?org.apache.shale.dialog.DIALOG_NAME=gfplanningsearch&ref_no=14/02792/FUL&Param=lg.Planning&viewdocs=true) page 4. The English Heritage guidance note *Piling and archaeology* (2007), page 14 states: 'The value of 5% has, inadvertently, gained credence as the maximum permissible area of destruction. This does not take into account the cumulative effect of successive developments. *Developments on archaeologically sensitive sites should strive to achieve lower values.*' (Our italics).
- 2.4 In fact, the figure of 5.31% may underestimate the level of loss. There is likely to be additional, peripheral destruction around the piles, and the close spacing of the latter in groups outside the main area of excavation will reduce the legibility of the surviving, intervening stratigraphy.
- 2.5 In partial mitigation we should therefore like the structural engineers, in consultation with the development control archaeologist, to select the piling method that will cause the least peripheral damage. During construction incidental damage must also be avoided as far as possible through machine churn, and pile caps and underground services must, in practice as well as in theory, be located in overburden.
- 2.6 Nevertheless, we acknowledge the efforts that have been made to make best use of the pre-existing basement and to minimise the loss of below-ground archaeology. Because of the high public value of the project, the specific requirements of the building and the constraints of the site, we reluctantly accept this loss. However, we are concerned that, with this precedent, the aspirations of the Chester Archaeological Plan for preservation *in situ* may become a 'dead letter'. It is easy to envisage commercial pressure in the future to cut corners on foundation design etc, especially in the Northgate development, and we fear that CWaC, with its focus on economic development, may not heed the advice of its own archaeological officers. Indeed, with the recent loss of a post in the Council's Archaeological Planning and Advisory Service,

we wonder how much time in future the surviving officers will be able to devote to giving advice on complex projects. In these circumstances the survival of some of the most important of the city's buried archaeology will be solely dependent on English Heritage.

- 2.7 Despite these strictures, the Society welcomes the inclusion of a community archaeology element in the excavation programme and in principle would be keen to be involved. We are sure that the large-scale excavation of a key site in tracing the evolution of the city centre over 2000 years will arouse public interest and enthusiasm.
- 3.0 *Exterior design*
- 3.1 A modern theatre, with its auditorium and flytower, is almost inevitably massive and 'boxy'. The challenge is to embed such a building as comfortably as possible in a generally low-rise, fine-grained setting. Specifically, it needs to have an external appearance that respects not only that of the Odeon, but also the Arts and Crafts and Victorian medieval revival buildings along Hunter Street and at the north end of Town Hall Square, which are classed as 'Buildings of Townscape Merit' ([Chester City Centre and Approaches Characterisation Study](#), pages 93–4).
- 3.2 Correspondence with Places Matter! and English Heritage has been preoccupied with external and internal changes to the existing Odeon building. The few comments that they have made on the proposed new building have been generally supportive, but the design does not seem to have been subject to the detailed critical analysis that is essential for such a large building in the centre of a conservation area.
- 3.3 Although references are made in the documents supporting the planning application to the supposedly 'monolithic' nature of the Odeon, with holes 'punched' through it, its design is actually very sophisticated. It is made up of a few very simple shapes, but these have been refined, for example by vertical ribbing on the towers and horizontal grooving on the Hunter Street wall of the auditorium. This detailing is strong enough to articulate the basic shapes yet delicate enough to complement the traditional detailing of neighbouring buildings. The Odeon does not dominate the latter in massing or scale, although the tower at the south-eastern corner is tall enough to form a 'landmark' at the north end of the Town Hall Square. The green-tiled mansard roof reduces the apparent height of the Hunter Street façade of the auditorium. The separate elements of the building are well integrated, and the recessed façade towards the south-eastern corner indicates clearly where the main entrance is to be found.
- 3.4. The first three storeys of the façade of the proposed new theatre building have the same eaves height as the existing Odeon building and are largely fronted with narrow glass panels that wrap around the brick auditorium. This height seems appropriate, while the glass panels avoid an over-long and boring brick façade and probably add enough visual interest, at least when illuminated at night. Thus this arrangement seems to work reasonably well, having a sympathetic scale and balancing respect for the old with innovation and introducing an active street frontage. However, the flytower and studio/bar make the new building as a whole appear (to some extent unavoidably) considerably more massive than the Odeon, as a glance at the elevation and section drawings will show. This tends to diminish the Odeon, especially as the two buildings are 'read' as one. Could not one or two bays be recessed to create a break between them and indicate that one is, in fact, dealing with two buildings? Such a recess would also emphasise the position of the entrance, which is currently weak, as pointed out by the Places Matter! Review panel.

- 3.5 We have doubts as to whether the staggered bond with which it is proposed to decorate the flytower would be appreciated so high up. Surely much larger-scale patterning is required, such as the diaper work seen on the Nordrhein-Westfalen Landesarchiv building in Duisburg (*Design and Access Statement*, page xlv). Finally, why is decoration only proposed on the eastern and southern sides of the tower, when the northern and especially the western sides will also be visible?
- 3.6 We consider the rooftop bar particularly problematical. The projection of this large, rectangular, dark, metal-clad structure over Hunter Street gives the impression that it is just a 'box stuck on box' without any attempt at integration. As a roofscape element it is out of scale in its surroundings; it is domineering rather than impressive and insensitive in the way it diminishes the Odeon; nor will it be able to avoid being seen alongside the much more delicate Arts and Crafts and Victorian medieval revival buildings at the east end of Hunter Street. The fact that the bar may ultimately look down directly onto a new Market Square surrounded by modern buildings does not negate these shortcomings. The rectangular outline of the bar needs to be broken up/reduced and made much lighter-looking. For example, the roofline of the bar might be lowered *vis a vis* the studio (*cf* the way that the highest parts of the roof of the Odeon are generally pulled back from the street frontage) and its frontage could be pulled back slightly behind the main building line (*cf* the similar modifications to the metal-clad penthouses to the student flats recently approved for the Linenhall site). A weathered copper (ie green) cladding might also be considered.
- 3.7 When viewed from the City Walls, the large, plain north faces of the flytower and studio look similarly uninspired in comparison with the narrow, pierced facades and gables of the buildings on King Street; they, too, require some detailing to break them up.
- 3.7 To help to form a better judgement on some of these matters, we recommend that some more visualisations are generated, especially of the south façade as it would appear from the proposed new Market Square and of the west façade as it would appear from the west end of Hunter Street and/or from Sens Close, on the western side of the Inner Ring Road.

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On behalf of
Chester Archaeological Society www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk

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