



DERBYSHIRE HISTORIC BUILDINGS TRUST

DHBT statement to the Derby Telegraph regarding the Hippodrome and the Assembly Rooms

Whilst the city council's vision for a new multi-purpose theatre and entertainment centre on the site of the Assembly Rooms is laudably ambitious, there remains the question of whether the finance will ever be gained and how long it will take to be realised. Once demolished, the Assembly Rooms site could remain vacant for years, and arguably Derby would have lost a good example of brutalist architecture, which, in time, will be celebrated. (Victorian architecture now loved, was once reviled)

The Assembly Rooms, designed by Neville Condor of Casson Condor and Partners in 1970, is not listed (though some other buildings they designed are), primarily because the interior finish of bare brick and concrete wall surfaces has been eroded by the painting and boarding up of the large areas of exposed concrete in the late 20th century. But as part of a major rehabilitation these alterations could be undone, particularly as internally the original lighting and plain wood door and bar fittings remain. The elaborate plaster 17th century ceiling in the Darwin Hall entrance Foyer that was originally installed in Newcastle House that formerly stood on the Assembly Rooms site Interior could also be saved. And the exterior is very little changed with the iconic tinted glass, zinc clad, first floor façade to the crush foyer walkway unaltered.

However, the confirmed immunity to listing given in 2015 enables other alterations to be made which could help bring it up to date without undue restriction. There are architects specialising in the re-invigoration of Britain's brutalist architecture - the dramatic restoration of Denys Lasdun's National Theatre being a prime example.

In parallel, Derby is witnessing the sad decline of an earlier relic – The grade II listed Hippodrome. Constructed in 1914, it was popularly appreciated as somewhere special with many memorable artists performing, such as Flanagan and Allan (who wrote "Underneath the Arches" in Derby referring to Friargate Bridge!), Julie Andrews and Sean Connery. It was the first theatre in Britain to have a bioscope.

Converted to a cinema in 1930 and back to a theatre format in 1950, then lastly, into a bingo hall. Unlike any other major city in Britain, Derby no longer has a large theatre. This was, and could be that theatre, such as Sheffield Lyceum or the recently rescued Regent at Stoke, suited to touring theatres and acts, which Derby Playhouse is not. The comparative roles of The Hippodrome and Derby Theatre could be similar to Nottingham's Theatre Royal and Playhouse

The Hippodrome is not without its detractors but there are many who are passionate to see it arise, Phoenix like, from the ashes, notably the Hippodrome Trust who, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and backed by the Theatres Trust, have gained planning permission for its restoration

The difficulty perceived by many is its location on Green Lane. Yet the pending acquisition of the Debenhams and Duckworth Square site by the City Council, could, together with the use of the (currently underused) 220 space multi storey car park on Macklin Street and the restoration of the Theatre, could facilitate a transformation of the area. Synergistically, the University's support and

training facilities for Derby Theatre are located in the Grade II listed former Art and Technical College on the opposite side of Green Lane.

So, how does this affect the Assembly Rooms?

The Trust believes the provision of a seated performance venue at the Hippodrome for an audience of 2,000 (?) suitable for receiving touring acts would relieve the Assembly Rooms of this role and allow it to be fitted as a truly flat floor venue.

The City Council's proposals envisage providing both in a multi complex building on the Assembly Rooms site and confirm that if the capital can be raised both activities could be self-supporting thereafter on revenue income. What's good for the goose is good for the Gander! The same would apply to rescuing the Hippodrome *and concurrently* upgrading the Assembly Rooms, which, the Trust argue, would not only be cheaper (£30m and £25m respectively compared with £80m for the Council Option), but a much quicker way to revitalise both areas of town.

Starting afresh, rather than upgrading the Assembly Rooms could take decades, bearing in mind that the more simply configured Quad took 12 years from inception to completion!

Further, the dual Hippodrome/Assembly Rooms option could target both Heritage and Arts Lottery Grants whereas the Assembly Room replacement would only attract Arts funding from the Lottery.

This could provide a 'win-win' for Derby.

The Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust believe that the dual Option would save two elements of Derby's performing Heritage from the early and mid-20th century, rather than the loss of them both and in this respect, as well as others, is an option that should be supported

The current owner, Christopher Anthony and his debtors, through administrators Blake Finance, are now trying to sell, but fail to recognise not only that they paid too much for the property (£375k, rather than the Derby New Theatres Association who tried to acquire it for £260k) but also that their actions have since devalued it further, and yet are seeking to sell for c£500k rather than the £100k(?) it is now worth. Therefore, when they say that they have received no serious offer (Derby Telegraph 4th October) it is because they have utterly unrealistic expectations

Derby CC said in the past that they would compulsorily purchase the building if the Hippodrome Trust could provide the money for a back to back purchase and demonstrate a viable business plan. This offer needs renewing to enable the Trust to apply for funding from the HLF and get the project underway at a realistic purchase price.

assembly Rooms;

Fixed to the ceiling of the Darwin Hall entrance foyer, which lies within the smaller south-east building, is part of an elaborate plaster ceiling that was originally installed in Newcastle House, a C17 dwelling that formerly stood on the Assembly Rooms site

Interior:

Neville Conder of Casson Conder