

Manchester Opera House:

Digital Signage – The Business Case

Context

- The historic significance of the Opera House as a Grade II listed building within a conservation area is well understood - and also valued - by ATG. This is evidenced by the significant programme of capital investment into the building which has been undertaken over the last 12 months. This programme totals more than £1.5m, and includes the restoration of the building's façade with an aesthetic sympathetic to the theatre's historic origins, which has been designed in close consultation with the Planning department.
- With the façade works at completion, we are keen to make further investment in the building through the installation of a new digital signage system which would provide a number of benefits to both audience members and show producers:
 - o A smarter appearance with improved clarity and consistency of signage.
 - o Simpler and more effective operation, taking advantage of contemporary technology to allow displays to be updated or switched over at the touch of a button, and reduce paper consumption.
 - o Ensuring the theatre stays up-to-date with producers and promoters' expectations, given that theatre marketing is moving increasingly to digital formats. This will allow the Opera House to continue to attract the best touring productions in the country, building on the reputation it is developing as the home of the 'Manchester Gets It First' programme of premiere productions, and attracting several hundred-thousand visitors to the city centre each year.

1. The Broader Perspective

It is important not only to assess the proposals from the perspective of the building as a Heritage asset, but also take into account the function of the building as site for the operation of a modern-day business, presenting first-rate theatrical performances. This function is both integral to the cultural and social life of the city and its night-time economy, and also the route through which hundreds of thousands of people each year are able to actively experience this heritage building via the purpose for which it was originally designed.

The Broader Perspective – detailed points:

- Comments previously recently received from the Planning department regarding the scheme appear to view the proposals purely through the lens of the building as a Heritage asset, rather than considering the operational requirements of the building's function as a theatre.
- This approach overlooks the fact that it is necessary for the theatre's operation to continue to move with the times to meet contemporary expectations of audience members and show producers, in order to sustain itself as a viable place of business. If the theatre is treated purely as a museum piece, then there is a risk that it will fall behind its competitors and eventually become unviable as a modern-day site for the performance of theatrical productions, thereby depriving Manchester of one of its key cultural assets, and of a significant driver to the city's night-time economy.

- In any assessment of the building's heritage significance, the ongoing active operation of the theatre as a historic venue which can be experienced and enjoyed by people from across Manchester and beyond should be considered paramount.
- To put this in context, the heritage value provided by the Opera House as a living, breathing venue welcoming in the region of 400,000 visitors per annum is unquestionably significantly greater than other historic buildings which formerly operated as theatres (such as the Theatre Royal in the very near vicinity) which are now sadly closed, inaccessible to the public, and typically in a deteriorating state of repair.

The Broader Perspective – points of reference:

- The importance of this broader perspective when considering proposals affecting heritage assets is actually specifically highlighted in the NPPF:
 - o Paragraph 195 explains that historic assets should be conserved “so that that they can be enjoyed **for their contribution to the quality of life of existing and future generations**”.
 - o Paragraph 196 stresses that the conservation strategy should “the **wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits**” of the historic environment. It also highlights the need for a “**positive strategy** for the conservation and enjoyment” of the historic environment including assets “at risk through neglect, decay or other threats”.
 - o Paragraph 203 requires local authorities to take account of the desirability of sustaining heritage assets with “**viable uses consistent with their preservation**”, and “**the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality**”.
 - o Paragraph 208 explains that “where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm” (as even the Planning department Comments acknowledge is the case in this instance), any harm “**should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including... securing its optimum viable use**”.
- As outlined above, we believe it important that the wider public benefit to the people of Manchester which is derived from the successful ongoing operation of the building as a busy and vibrant venue for contemporary theatrical performances is considered, both in heritage terms, and also in relation to the wider contribution which the theatre operation provides to the cultural, social and economic life of the city.
- In paragraph 201, the NPPF also instructs local authorities to assess proposals affecting heritage assets taking account of any “necessary expertise”. The Theatres Trust may be considered the preeminent expert in this field given its role as a statutory consultee in the planning system to comment on theatre related planning applications and advise on planning policy to secure cultural policies that protect theatres. In its own independent comments on the proposals, The Theatres Trust has stated:

“There have been several applications of this nature for digital screens at theatres across the UK in recent years. They provide operational benefits in that they can be more dynamic and responsive to different audiences, allowing messages to be tailored for greater effect. They also remove the need and cost of printing and manual change.”

“The principle of signage of the proposed size and scale at the indicated locations on the building is already established, albeit there is a slight adjustment above the canopy. Nonetheless show signage and advertisements can be considered an integral and recognisable element of theatre character and design. Digital screens represent a more

modern and dynamic interpretation of this. We do not consider the character and special historic significance of the Opera House to be undermined and the impact in heritage terms is neutral. We are supportive of the granting of listed building consent."

- Additionally, as a representation of the views of producers and promoters who choose to bring many of the most popular touring shows in the country to the Opera House, please see the attached letter of support from Adrian Lesurf, Marketing Director for Crossroads Productions. The letter details the benefits of digital screens from a producer's perspective when booking a venue, and how these are increasingly becoming established in their form at a wide range of venues around the country, both historic and modern.
- More locally, we also believe the broader perspective outlined above is also in line with similar directions outlined in MCC's Manchester Core Strategy:
 - o Policy CC4 states "The **City Centre will be the focus for culture** and leisure in the City Region. **Proposals to improve the appearance, use and accessibility of all cultural and visitor attractions and associated facilities will be supported.**"
 - o Policy 10.60 "aims to encourage evening and nighttime economy uses that **contribute to the vitality** of the Manchester's centres and that support the creation of a safe, balanced and socially inclusive evening economy".
 - o Policy EN3 requires that "Proposals which enable the (re-)use of heritage assets **will be encouraged** where they are considered consistent with the significance of the heritage asset".
 - o Policy CC9 explains that "development **must support the range of uses the Council expects** in the City Centre".

2. Mitigation of 'harm':

- Cognisant of the Opera House's listed building status, the proposed digital signage package has been designed to be aesthetically sympathetic to the building, either replacing existing signage with like-for-like digital alternatives, or in many cases taking the opportunity to rationalise existing signage in order to ensure there will be a net benefit in terms of the existing historic fabric of the building.
- New signs would replace existing signs which are of equivalent size, brightness and prominence.
- Signs will adhere to requirements regarding brightness levels.
- It should be noted that none of the current poster sites are original to the building or of particular historic significance. So it would be anachronistic to take the view that the "form of illumination" and "appearance" of the existing signage is "more appropriate", as the proposed digital signs are no less authentic than the current signs.
- Comments received regarding the originally proposed digital V-sign have been taken into account, and the latest proposal is for a flat 2-sided screen positioned perpendicular to the façade in order to minimise visual impact on the Quay St elevation, and in fact significantly reduce impact compared to the existing sign. This location is a top priority for the scheme, given the practical issues encountered in changing the existing analogue sign for each production.
- The scheme is specifically intended to replace the outdated, tired and worn poster sites with a suite of digital screens which will be significantly fresher and smarter in appearance.

Furthermore, the display of the screens will provide for a more consistent appearance than the current paper poster sites which are more prone to wear, tear and weather damage.

- There are also comments which make reference to an “adverse impact on the setting and appreciation of the Grade II* listed Cobden House and Deansgate Conservation Area”. These suggest that the “quantum, size and illumination” will have a detrimental impact on the Opera House’s neighbours. However the number, size and brightness of the proposed digital screens will be no greater than the current poster sites.

Assessment of ‘harm’ – points of reference:

- As noted above, in their independent expert assessment The Theatres Trust have judged that *“We do not consider the character and special historic significance of the Opera House to be undermined and the impact in heritage terms is neutral.”*
- When the proposals are assessed against ICOMOS guidance on heritage impact, the proposed alterations can be classed as having an overall neutral impact on the building, as there is no change to the historic fabric of the building, and the proposed signage is of similar size and appearance to that existing currently.
- Locally, it is also the case that there are already examples of historic theatre buildings (amongst other types of buildings) within conservation areas in Manchester City Centre which have had external digital screens installed for a number of years. The Royal Exchange Theatre in the St Ann’s Square Conservation Area is one example. There can therefore be no justification for coming to this conclusion regarding the proposals for the Opera House.
- Particularly given that the Opera House is located on the very edge of a conservation area and abuts an district of extensive and striking contemporary development around Hardman Square / Spinningfields Square, clearly any impact on the setting of Cobden House which these modest updates to the Opera House will generate is far outweighed by the much more significant impact of development which has already been permitted in this area.
- More specifically, the local area already within and adjacent to the Conservation Area already contains an array of digital screens. These are positioned on historic as well as contemporary buildings, and also include a plethora of Manchester City Council’s own pavement totem advertising screens, one of which is sited directly outside Cobden House:



Digital Screen – Peter St



Digital Screen – Hardman St



Pavement Totem – Deansgate



Pavement Totem – outside Cobden House

Conclusion:

- We acknowledge that the proposals in their original form could perhaps have done more to explain the justification for the screens in ensuring the long-term continued use of the premises as the site for a contemporary business presenting theatrical performances.
- We welcome the opportunity to discuss the proposals with the Council through the pre-engagement process. A number of suggestions made in the comments received regarding the original application have been taken on board in the design shared during the pre-application process. Further reductions in the scope of the scheme have now been implemented in the third iteration of the design submitted in this new application, *together with a change to the appearance of the screen frames. (awaiting confirmation from ibrand on this)*
- We therefore hope the clarifications now provided are satisfactory in making the case why these proposals are both justifiable and reasonable in any assessment of 'harm'.