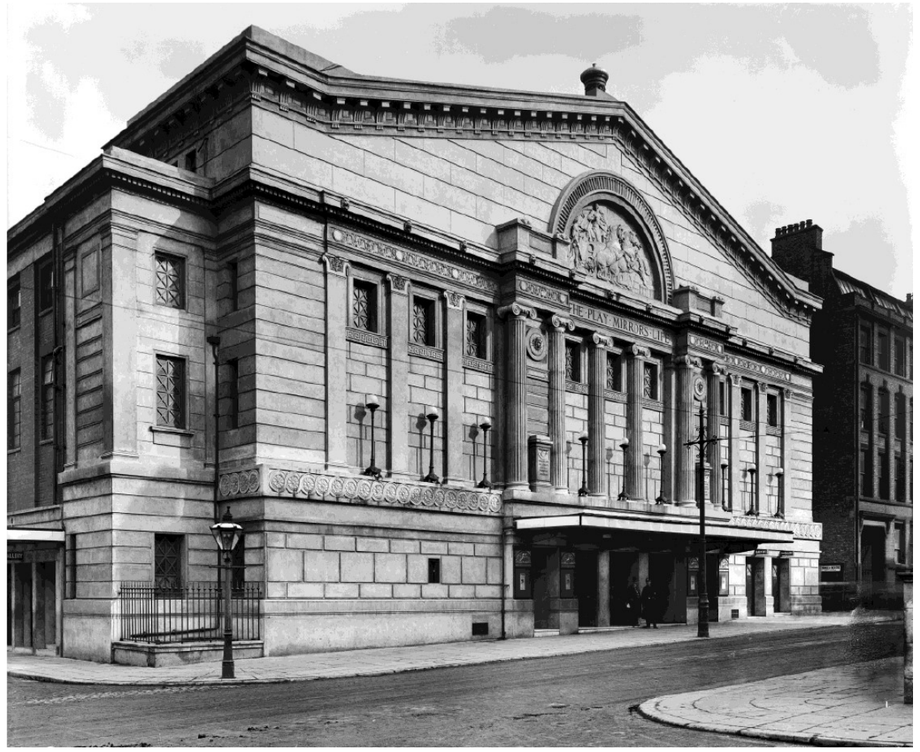
STUDIO DJL

Opera House, Manchester - Wireless Access Point Installation

Design + Access + Heritage Statement

October 2023



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Contents

- Executive Summary 4

- Heritage Assessment 5

- Relevant Planning History 7

- Design + Access 8

- Heritage Impact Assessment 10

- Conclusion 12

Executive Summary

Project: Opera House, Manchester, Wireless Access Point Installation

Address: The Opera House, Quay Street, Manchester, M3 3HP

Project Ref.: 2334-02

This report has been prepared to accompany the listed building consent application relating to the installation of wireless access points at the Opera House, Manchester.

The proposal has fully taken into consideration the important historical and architectural significance of the Opera House. It is a venue that holds an important place in the history of Manchester and continues to play a vital role in the cultural life of the city. The theatre requires careful development to preserve the building for both its special architectural qualities and the memorable events that have taken place within.

The proposal seeks to improve access to wireless data for patrons, staff and visitors. The upgrades to the existing wireless data infrastructure will facilitate better experiences for audience members and ensure that the Opera House remains an important and successful performance venue.

The following report identifies the relevant heritage value of the building and the wider context, notes relevant planning history, sets out the reasoning behind the design choices made, and finally states why the proposal is considered to be in accordance with listed building consent.

To be read in conjunction with:

2334-02-DJL-00-P-011 Site Location Plan

Wireless Survey Report - Opera House Manchester - 9 August 2022

Meraki MR42 Data Sheet

Meraki MR45 Data Sheet

Meraki MR46 Data Sheet

Quay Street Elevation - circa 1912

Heritage Assessment

Overview

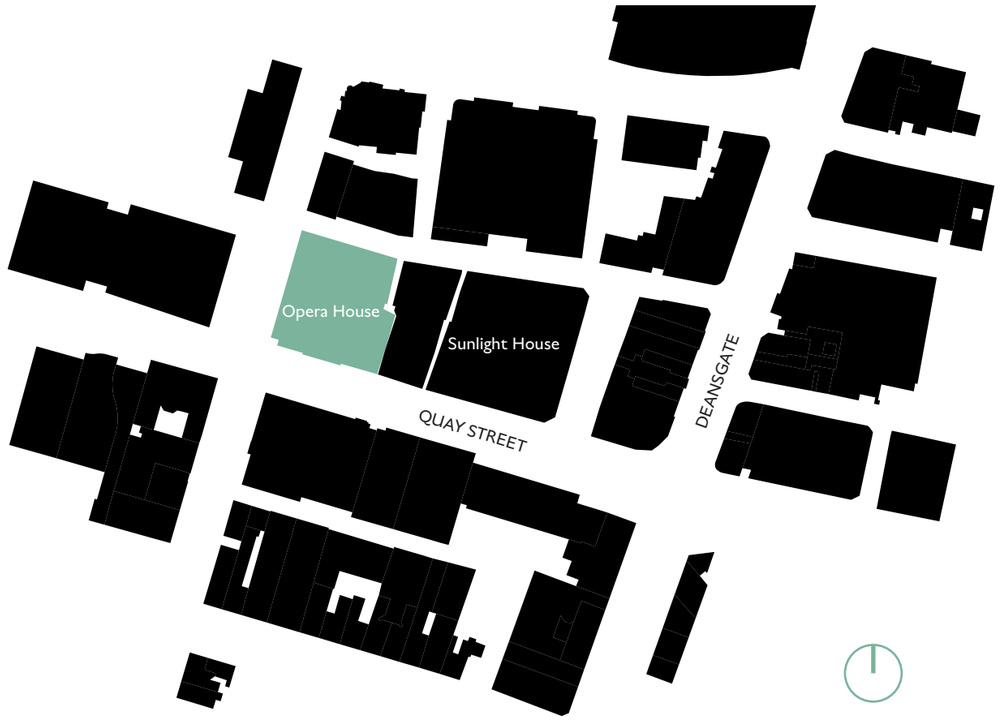
The applicant site is officially listed as 'The Opera House' and located on Quay Street in the centre of Manchester.

The Theatre was listed on 3 October 1974 and is Grade II. The listing states:

Formerly known as: The New Theatre QUAY STREET. Theatre, now opera house. 1912, by Richardson and Gill with Farquarson; altered. Stucco on brick, slate roof. Rectangular plan at right-angles to street. Classical style. Front block of 3 storeys with attic, 1:1:11:1:1 bays, symmetrical, the first and last bays set back; with plinth, banded rusticated stucco to all levels; giant order to 1st and 2nd floors, consisting of a 5-bay centre with engaged fluted Ionic columns, the 1st and 5th bays breaking forwards and each containing a lettered pedestal at the foot and a mask roundel at the top, flanked by 3 pilastered bays each side, these and the 3 centre bays having windows at the top with geometric glazing; entablature with frieze lettered "THE PLAY MIRRORS LIFE" in the centre and decorated in Wedgwood style in the other bays, dentilled cornice carried round and surmounted in the centre by a large semi-circular tympanum with allegorical relief; pedimental gable with moulded cornice on brackets. Five-bay wide entrance at ground floor, with later C20 canopy.

The theatre sits within the wider Deansgate Conservation Area. This conservation area comprises a well preserved collection of Victorian and early 20th century public and commercial buildings. The area is centered on the junction of Deansgate and Quay Street, with the Opera House at the conservations area's western boundary. Other important buildings include the Grade II* Free trade hall, the currently disused and oldest theatre in Manchester the Theatre Royal. Directly to the east of the Opera House is Sunlight House, an early and unusual example of high rise office development comprising a mix of international modern and classical styles of architecture.

Originally a dominant building in it's context, the Opera House is now dwarfed by surrounding buildings, in particular a new commercial tower built directly west of the theatre. However, the facade and prominence of the Opera House continues to contribute toward the architectural significance of the Deansgate Conservation Area.



Location of the Opera House in Deansgate Conservation Area

Cultural Heritage

The site was opened in 1912 as the New Theatre, changing names several times until settling on the Opera House in 1920. The theatre continued to operate until the 70s when, as was similar to many theatres during this era, it was converted to be used as a cinema and bingo hall. In 1984 it was converted back to a theatre and has continued in this function ever since, often hosting large musicals. It was refurbished in 2003 and in 2009 the Ambassador Theatre Group purchased the Opera House.

Under their ownership the theatre has enjoyed success hosting many memorable performances as well as various upgrades and refurbishment works. The Opera House has retained its position as one of the most important theatres in Manchester and makes a large contribution to the vibrant cultural and entertainment life of the city.

Architectural Heritage

As the listing description details, the primary element of important architectural significance is the theatre's classical stucco front elevation. This has been well preserved and is currently undergoing refurbishment. The side elevations are less ornamental and composed primarily of brick, as is common to many theatres.

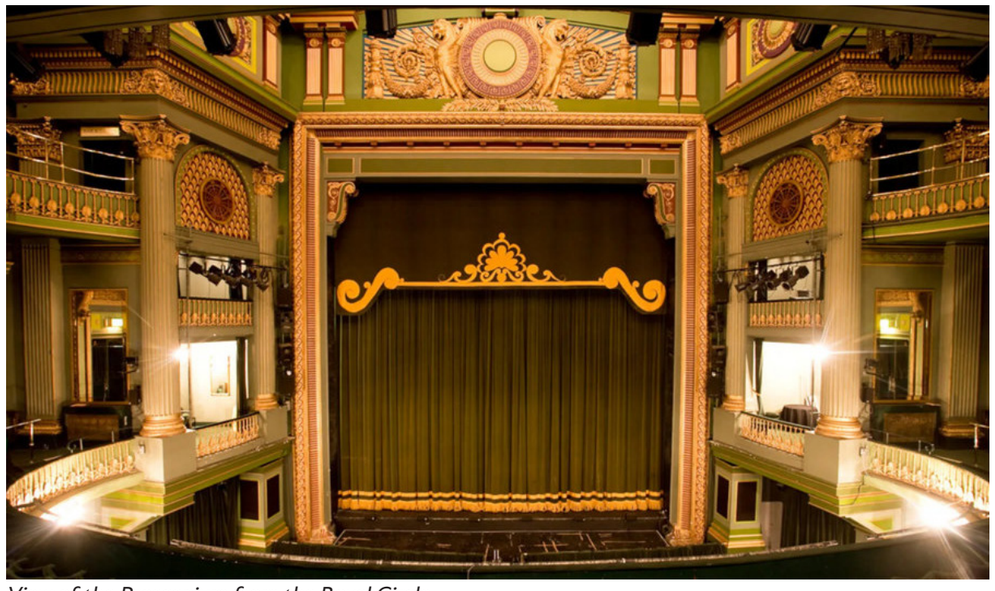
The works proposed in this application are all internal. The listing description does not make any reference to the architectural importance of the theatre's interior. Nevertheless, it is of great architectural importance, with the auditorium's planning and decoration being the primary elements of interest.

The auditorium features 2 wide and deep balconies of approximately 500 seats each, with boxes to the side of the proscenium joining the deep space between the balconies and the 13m wide stage. The auditorium is ornamented in the neo-classical style with large corinthian columns, enriched balconies and a heavily ornamental tympanum over the proscenium. The entire auditorium is enclosed by a deeply coffered arched ceiling. It is decorated in green and gold throughout, having been refurbished in 2011.

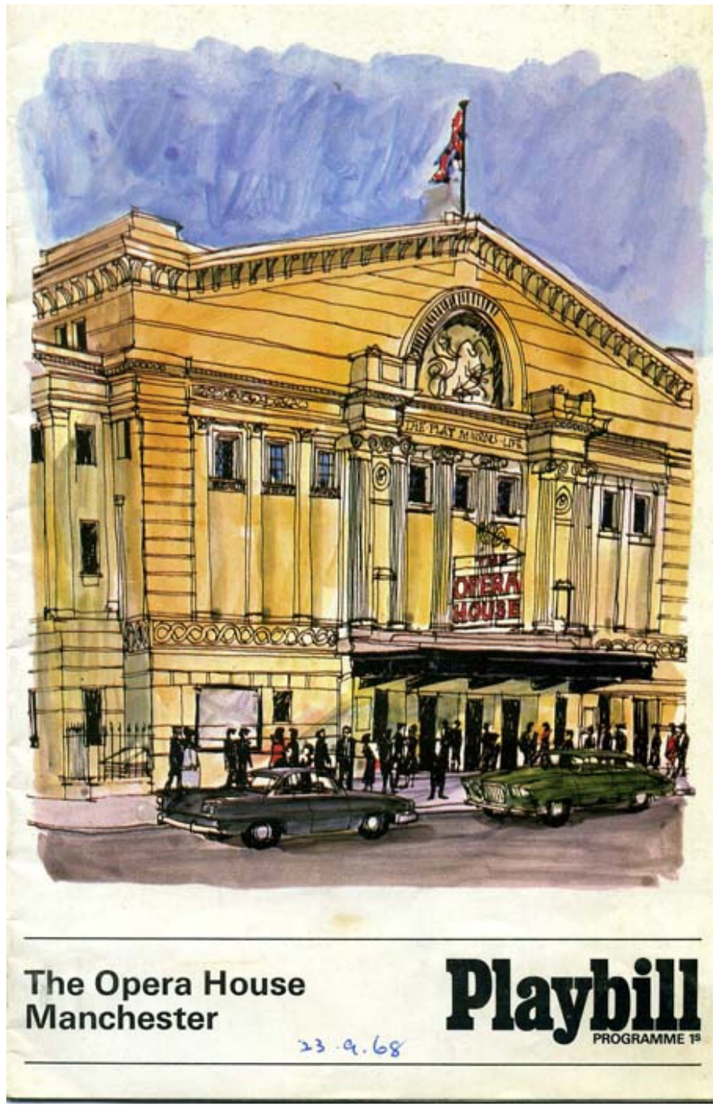
The Theatre's Trust notes the planning and proportions of the balconies has led to issues with audience sightlines. However, it praises the efficient planning of the auditorium within the site, lowering the stalls and allowing the balconies to oversail the foyer. The auditorium has a capacity of 1920 audience members.

The foyer spaces and front of house bars also feature important architectural elements original to the building. These are less comprehensive that the auditorium, but still include timber paneling, elaborate plaster mouldings, cornicing and architraves. As is common in a theatre of this age and history, there is a mixture of more modern interventions of varying sensitives to the architectural significance of the building. As is typical of a building of this complexity, there are many electrical services installed in the building, many of these surface mounted and exposed.

Combined, the theatre presents a well preserved example of early 20th century theatre architecture that should be protected and enhanced by any work proposed.



View of the Proscenium from the Royal Circle



1968 programme

Relevant Planning History

Given the scale and importance of the theatre, many planning and listed building consent applications have been made. Below is a summary of key applications that are relevant to the proposal:

January 1978

Listed building consent ref: F07990

Permission was granted for conversion of the theatre into a bingo social club

April 1984

Listed building consent ref: 021692

Permission was granted for internal alterations to change the use back into a theatre

January 2013

Listed building consent ref: 092689/LO/2010/C1

Permission was granted for works to the roof including edge protection and access ladders

April 2020

Listed building consent ref: 126635/LO/2020

Permission was granted for the repair and replacement of several windows

June 2023

Listed building consent ref: 137221/LO/2023

Permission was granted for the redecoration of the facade

Design + Access

Overview

The design proposes to upgrade the existing wireless data access throughout the theatre for patrons, staff and visitors. The key reasons for this programme of work are as follows:

- To facilitate the rollout of a reliable and standardized hearing assistance technology that will improve accessibility and inclusivity for all patrons of the theatre. This will ensure that all patrons including those with hearing and vision impairments can enjoy the performances with amplified sound and audio description from anywhere within the auditorium, an upgrade on the current offering which relies on line of sight to be operational. This will further ensure that the venue fulfils their duty as a service provider under the Equality Act 2010, providing an auxiliary aid to those who would otherwise be unable to enjoy the performance for reasons pertaining to disability.
- The new installation will also allow the use of 'Gala Pro'. An app with on demand captioning and audio description for those who require access to this, meaning that they will be able to attend any performance rather than only being able to attend the specific Audio Described/Captioned performance. In addition, the on demand captioning service may be beneficial to those who speak English as a second language, so that they may be able to follow the dialogue for further understanding.
- Improve access to WiFi for patrons in a time of ever increasing use of smart devices. This includes access to social media that helps promote the venue, access to online services such as programmes, ticket booking, ordering food and drinks from within the auditorium and also audience participation during certain performances (for example casting votes in a talent show).
- Facilitate electronic point of sale (EPoS) terminals in the auditorium to take payments using wireless PDQs
- Improve WiFi performance for staff and visitors to the building who require high speed Internet access for a range of typical activities required to run a theatre.

These works are crucial to ensure the theatre can remain a primary venue in the city and help broaden the demographic of patrons including those who were deterred from visiting in the past due to hearing impairments.

Current Installation

The current installation of wireless access points include a number of units installed throughout both the front and back of house areas. The coverage can be sporadic and will be unable to handle the future demands of wireless data commensurate with expected use. Nor can it facilitate the requirements for the new hearing assistance technology or EPoS use in the auditorium.

Generally speaking, the current units have been installed in a sensitive manner, making use of clusters of other surface mounted electrical hardware and set out neatly in front of house areas where original or important architectural details are present. By being surface mounted, including surface mounted trunking where required, these units have not made a permanent impact on the theatre's historical fabric.

Proposed Installation

A comprehensive survey of the current wireless installation has been undertaken, identifying the upgrades necessary to provide the required coverage. Please refer to the report included in the application for the full summary of this survey. The report has proposed suitable locations for the wireless access points to ensure good coverage. Studio DJL have worked with Node4 to identify locations that meet both the technical requirements of the theatre, but also preserve and enhance the architectural quality of the building.

Many of the access points are located in back of house areas where there is little evidence of important architectural features. These are mostly perfunctory spaces with

modern finishes and feature many different exposed services. Whilst these spaces are less architecturally significant than the public areas, it is still important that all works are installed sensitively and in a way that does not interfere with the original fabric of the building.

Areas of more careful and precise installation include the front of house circulation areas, bars and the auditorium. The primary objective of the upgrade works is to provide adequate coverage during a performance and so it will be necessary to install wireless access points within the auditorium. As the heritage assessment describes, the auditorium is of particularly special importance . So it is crucial that the installation of the units does not detract from the architectural character of the space.

Method of Installation

Where ever new wireless access points are to be installed, this will be done as sensitively and discreetly as possible with the utmost care taken to preserve the original fabric and overall appearance of the building's interior. This is particularly important in the front of house spaces and the auditorium. The following methods will be utilized during the installation of the works.

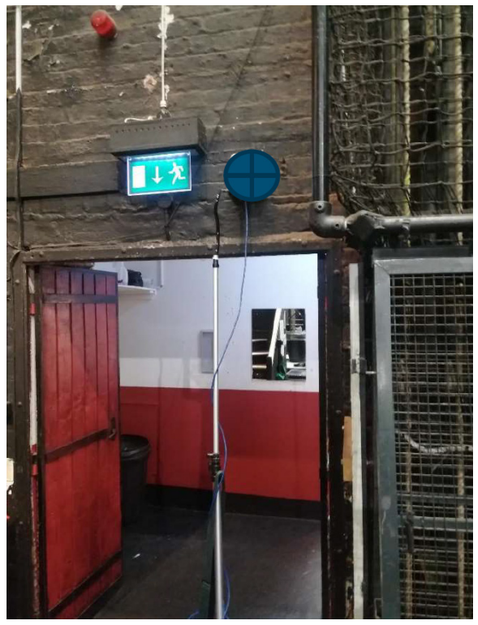
- Wherever possible, new hardware will be installed adjacent to existing clusters of electrical units. This will reduce the overall impact of technical infrastructure.
- New units will be installed in discrete locations whenever possible. Given the nature of the technology, it is sometimes necessary to install the units at high level for maximum coverage. This also minimizes the number of units required. Where units are visible, they are to be fixed sensitively and in proportion with the surrounding architectural features such as paneling, mouldings and timber work. They should be set out carefully and in such a way that does note detract from the overall elegance of the interior.
- Existing conduit for running cables will be utilized for new installations wherever this is practical.
- Where re-use of existing conduit is not possible, new surface mounted conduit will be used. This will be installed discretely, be as narrow as possible and run along existing architectural features such as dado rails to reduce the visual impact on the interior. Conduit should be of high quality durable material, finished to blend into the finishes, and fixed in a way that minimizes damage to the fabric of the building and allows for easy removal and replacement in the future.
- In limited situations where it is not practical to use surface mounted conduit or where it would have an adverse effect on the special character of the building (such as long exposed run across a blank wall or ceiling), penetrations in the existing walls and ceilings will need to be made. These should be as small as possible and be prioritized to non-original elements of the building. Cables should make use of existing voids wherever possible to avoid needing to chase into any surfaces.
- All wireless access point units should be fixed in a way that minimizes damage to the fabric of the building and allows for easy removal and replacement in the future.

Heritage Impact Assessment

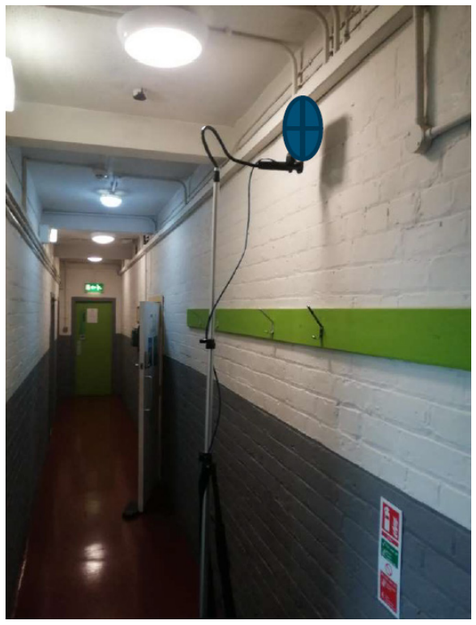
Overview

To demonstrate how the design has taken into consideration the impact of the architectural and historical heritage of the theatre, a selection of proposed wireless access point locations have been presented below. Please refer to the wireless survey report for plans and images showing the location of all proposed points.

Back of House Spaces

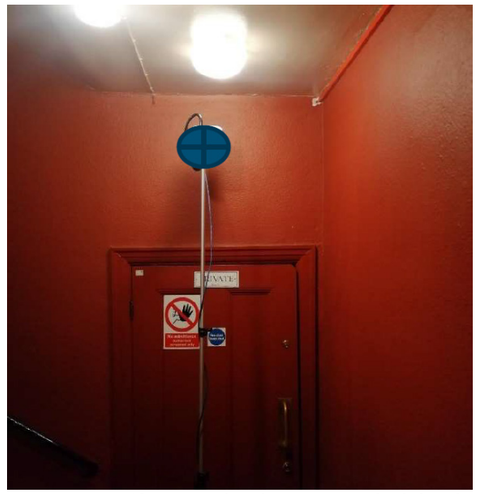


Location AP 6 - Stage right wings - Unit installed on the stage to provide full coverage. This unit would be clustered with other wall mounted technical equipment and painted black. Any fixings back to the original brick would minimize damage and allow for easy replacement in the future.

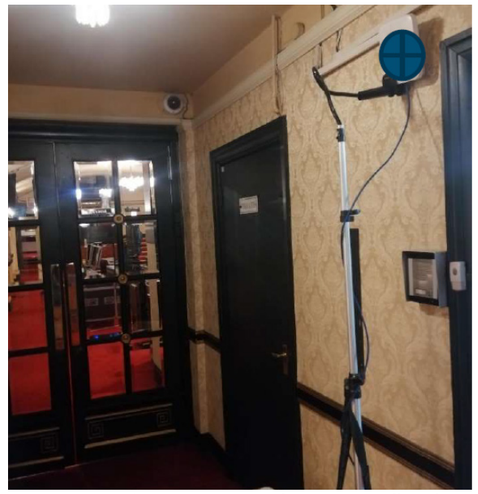


Location AP 27 - Gallery level - dressing room corridor - features painted brick walls with perfunctory architectural features. The access point unit will be installed at high level making use of existing conduit runs and will be white to minimize visual impact on the interior

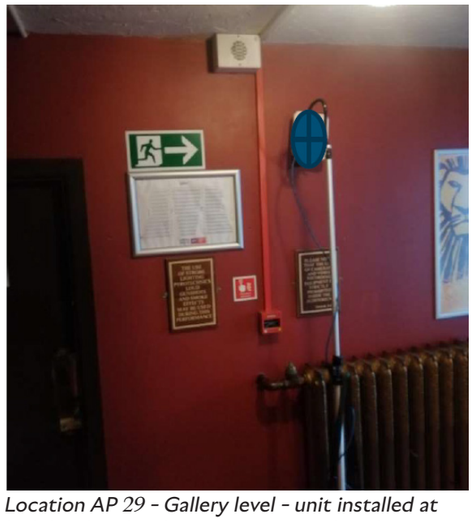
Front of House Spaces



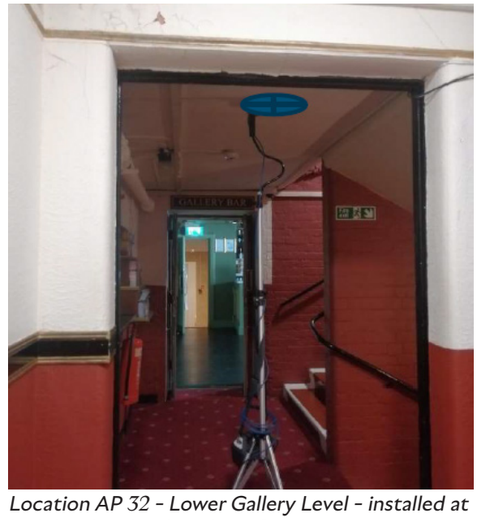
Location AP 12 - Foyer level - Unit is at high level and centered on the door.



Location AP 13 - Foyer corridor - Unit will make use of existing conduit runs and place at high level with other services to minimize visual impact.

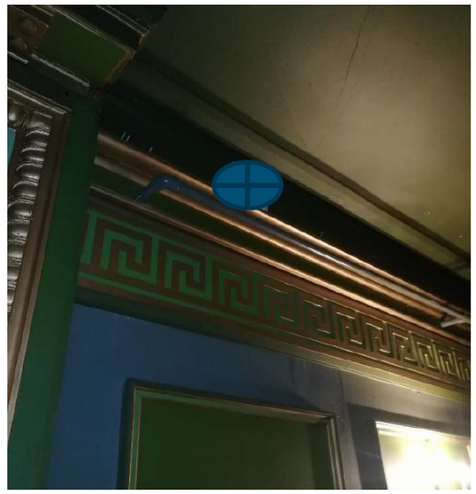


Location AP 29 - Gallery level - unit installed at high level with other equipment and in close proximity to existing conduit.



Location AP 32 - Lower Gallery Level - installed at high level and to be white. Conduit runs in close proximity.

Auditorium



Location AP A4 - Stalls level - unit installed discreetly above cornice line. Conduit obscured.

Location AP A6 - Stalls level - unit installed discreetly above cornice line. Conduit obscured.

Location AP A15 - Stalls level - unit installed discreetly above cornice line. Conduit obscured.

Location AP A11 - Stalls level - unit to be fixed to ceiling in close proximity to existing ceiling mounted services and cabling

Location AP A12 - Stalls level - unit installed discreetly above cornice line. Conduit obscured.

Conclusion

Having identified the elements of the theatre that constitute the historic and special architectural character of the building, this report concludes that those elements have been protected:

- The external appearance and setting of the building will be unaffected
- The impact on the historic elements of architectural significance affected by the proposal are minimal and are not considered to detract from the heritage value of the building. Moreover, they will enhance the experience of visitors and improve the functionality of the venue.
- The installation of wireless access points will be undertaken in a way that will minimize impact on the fabric of the building and in accordance with the method statement included in this report.

Planning policy documents and guidance considered for this application:

- *National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)*
- *Manchester Local Plan 2012-2027*
- *Deansgate/Peter Street Conservation Area – information on manchester.gov.uk*

Thank You

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