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## **HISTORIC BUILDING IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

recorded at

**Playhouse  
18-22 Greenside Place  
Old Town  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3AA**

on behalf of

**Ambassador Theatres Group**

## **1.0 Introduction**

This report shall seek to identify those elements of The Playhouse, Edinburgh which are of historic importance and consider the impact which the proposed works will have on those elements.

Historic importance should not be considered only in Architectural terms but also extend to encompass the social significance of the building in the locality. Similarly it should not be assumed that the impact of all works will of necessity be detrimental to the historic significance of the building. There is potential for much which may be beneficial to the long term future and appreciation of the historically valued elements of this building.

## **2.0 Proposed Brief**

The proposed works are to build a covered corridor and stair access to the auditorium utilising the existing get in covered walkway to the right side of the building, which will allow the cast of the Lion King to enter the building at the circle level under cover from the elements and sight of the public.

## **3.0 Architectural Significance**

### **History**

The Playhouse is the largest and most opulent cinema ever built in Scotland that still survives today in its original form. The only comparable cinemas with a larger seating capacity than it, the Playhouses in Dundee and Glasgow, have both been lost. While Fairweather's Playhouse in Ayr had a (very) slightly larger original seating capacity, and also survives, it was built for a provincial town, not a major city, and was budgeted to match. It has also been subject to alterations as a bingo hall.

The Edinburgh Playhouse is therefore the best surviving example of a cinema by architect John Fairweather; it is also the best surviving example in Scotland of the 'super-cinema', built when a combination of maximising the number of seats, and creating an expensive and pleasant experience for the patron was the most important factor in cinema design.

No other cinema auditorium of this scale and type survives in Scotland. It was listed Category B by Historic Scotland in 1974, and this was upgraded to Category A in 2008.

Opening in the late 1920s, when variety shows were still part of the cinema experience, the Playhouse was designed from the beginning with a large stage and full-height fly tower; this has proved key to its survival and re-use as a theatre venue.

The building has a unique design, making best use of its steeply sloping site, with a small low facade giving little indication of the scale of the auditorium concealed behind; the grand circle is entered from street level, with stairs down to the stalls, and stairs up to the upper circle.

John Fairweather was born in Glasgow in 1867 and died 1942. He specialised in designing cinemas for travelling families who were showing film performances at fairgrounds but wanted to settle down with permanent venues. Most of his cinemas were built for the Kemp and Green families and he principally worked for George Green from 1913 onwards. He is probably best known for creating the largest cinema in Europe, Green's Playhouse in Glasgow, which seated 4368 people. Prior to this, Fairweather was sent to the US by the Green family from 1922-23 in order to study cinema design there, and was particularly interested in the buildings by Thomas Lamb (a Scottish emigrant).

John Fairweather's cinemas typically take a conservative approach to their respective street frontages. The interiors were usually Beaux Arts styled with Corinthian columns on a grand scale and a saucer dome in the ceiling - most of his Green's Playhouses, as well as the Capitol, Ibrox, followed this pattern.

His design for the Edinburgh Playhouse interior was quite different - notably not built for Green's, but for the Edinburgh based Maguire and Lumley. Building commenced on the Playhouse in 1927, although opening was delayed for nearly a year after subsidence was found.

The remedial works included removing sections of brickwork, breaking into the steel columns and 'jacking up the building' whilst piles were driven down into bedrock - some going down as far as 60 feet. John Foubister, the building Chief Engineer of the time, personally supervised these operations. In addition, hundreds of tons of concrete was poured into new foundation sections, and the steel tie rods which form adjustable counter-buttresses were added to the inside of the rear wall.

These works cost almost as much as the original construction, nearly bankrupting the parent company.

Opening on the 'Glorious Twelfth' of August, 1929, the Playhouse originally seated 3,040. These were made up of 1,500 seats in the Stalls (coloured crimson, costing 1/3), 680 in the circle (coloured purple, costing 2/4), and 860 in the balcony (coloured old gold, costing 1/- in the front, 9d in the back).

Despite its huge stage, and numerous dressing rooms (stage 45ft deep, 85 ft wide; 30 dressing rooms; proscenium 49ft wide by 38ft high.), the Playhouse was designed and built to be first and foremost a cinema, by one of Scotland's premier cinema architects. The opening notices in the press refer to the '*New Super Cinema - Edinburgh Playhouse*' and '*Edinburgh's largest cinema - the Playhouse in Leith Walk*'.

Fairweather had studied cinema design in the USA, and brought many ideas back with him to Scotland. The 1927 Roxy was the 'Cathedral of the Motion Picture'; the largest, grandest and most expensive cinema ever built. The Scotsman suggested that '*The Playhouse has been modelled on the Roxy Cinema Theatre in New York*', although this seems likely to refer to its scale

and opulence, rather than any direct architectural connection. Edinburgh's Playhouse is therefore its closest surviving spiritual descendent in Scotland.

The gradient on the sloping site is 1 in 4.5; the auditorium was cleverly planned to suit the ground levels. The entrance had shops on either side, and was 'flanked at the corners by a separate entrance to the cafe on two upper floors, and an independent exit from the stalls floor.

'Blaxter stone' was used for the frontage; with light buff-coloured bricks for the side and back walls. The entrance is 29ft wide and 30ft high; the entire frontage is 102 ft wide.

It was built on the site of the Tabernacle, an Edinburgh landmark for over 100 years.

The entrance vestibule had pay boxes on either side, partly recessed, with a Terrazo floor and fibrous plaster to ceiling and walls, with woodwork in mahogany and Borneo cedar. The original decorative scheme was 'muffled tints of green, warm grey and old old ivory relieved with gold.

The vestibule leads into the Grand Foyer. This is 45ft by 34 ft. 'Ceiling is segmental with top-lighting, double-glazed with ornamental leaded work executed by A Cunningham & Co (Edinburgh). Lower walls panelled in Borneo Cedar.' The original colour scheme was 'muffled tones of orange, yellow and old ivory'. There was a medallion design carpet by Templeton & Co, Glasgow.

There were tea rooms on two floors, plus a tea, coffee and soda fountain lounge.

There are several interesting light fittings in the vestibule area, especially the two bronze lamps on either side of main staircase: figures holding lamps, standing on fish with open mouths. There are two deco style ceiling light fittings on either side of the central back-lit glazed ceiling.

From here there are steps down in the centre to the stalls and downstairs bars; stairs up on either side of this to the balcony. Entrances straight ahead on either side of these central stairs lead to the circle.

The auditorium is unlike any other Fairweather cinema; the typical Green's Playhouse had large Corinthian pillars down each side of the auditorium and a large oval dome in the centre of the ceiling. Edinburgh's Playhouse – notably not designed for Green's - has neither of these.

The original auditorium colour scheme had 'Tones of ivory and stone predominate on the walls, and the roof is decorated with bands of pale green leaves intersected with gold at intervals. The seats in the different parts of the house have been upholstered to harmonise with the general scheme of the decoration. The organ fronts are in Venetian style, and the clock settings, which are square, are neat and attractive.

'The wall treatment is plain with Borneo Cedar panelling. Ornamental plaster work has been concentrated on the proscenium border, organ chambers, balcony fronts, and windows on side walls'

'Pelmet and leg drops are wine-coloured velour with ornament worked in gold, and gold and silver cloth curtain and drapings mask in the picture screens'

The auditorium is 100ft wide by 114 deep; the main ceiling is 66ft high. The interior is not as originally conceived. Early drawings show an atmospheric interior, with Moorish temples in the alcoves either side. As built, it is actually a nautical theme. The rear wall of the original Stalls Foyer and Mezzanine (opposite the stairs going down) was meant to represent an old Galleon, with the columns etc complementing the 'stern of the ship' you were looking towards.

All of the bespoke plasterwork throughout the building, is of sea anemones, conches, and other sea plants. The details around the proscenium arch feature a clam shell with a sea horse on either side, anemone in the centre, and small flowers in the centre of every 'trellis' crossing. The decoration at the

bottom of the pilasters either side is a pair of dolphins. The clam shell motif is repeated elsewhere.

On each side of the auditorium, at balcony level, there are four panels which have red curtain material behind them. These conceal windows which: 'At suitable times during the day the auditorium can be flushed with nature's cleansers by simply opening the windows in side and end walls, which during the performance are shuttered to exclude the light. The panels in the balcony, either side of the windows, with the 'celestial instruments' seem slightly out of place in the general decorative scheme, perhaps 'off the shelf' panels were used at a time when money was beginning to get extremely tight during the final stages of completing the building.

One unusual feature of the auditorium is the plain, curved plaster area directly above the proscenium. The opening descriptions of this are very interesting:

'The lighting is strikingly original, and in the broad arch over the screen and the stage a special design is utilised to depict either morning sunrise, a golden sunset, or the deep blue of the sky of a summer evening - whichever is appropriate to the occasion. The central ceiling dome also originally had 9 circuits of lighting in it, which actually formed a set of three interleaved circuits, to allow red, blue, and green to be used, so some atmospheric effects could also be created with that.

The opening descriptions note that a '*Brenograph have been fitted up by J Frank Brockliss Ltd*'. Brenographs were designed to project 'a canopy of clouds moving across a field of twinkling stars as used in the atmospheric theatre to complete the illusion that the pictures are being viewed beneath nocturnal skies'. They were expensive pieces of equipment; this is the only known documented instance of a Scottish installation. The Brenograph, which was a complete dual unit, with a massive range of rotating effects and attachments, was used to project onto the stage curtains and proscenium area, but only as high up as the bottom of the permanent house border. It was located in the centre of the projection room, and a major limiting factor for the picture size in the Playhouse, was the fact that anything projected from the

room 'scraped' the underside of the balcony to get out, and it was only possible to get to around 26' up from the stage floor. The projection booth was situated between the circle and the balcony, reached by a separate entrance from outside. Originally, there were four Simplex projectors, with two fitted out for sound equipment. The throw for the projectors to the screen was 104 ft.

Originally there was a cinema organ; this was a three manual, 86-stop Hilsdon Organ. At opening, the 'orchestra and organ have unfamiliar habits. The orchestra - when it is not required - disappears quietly by means of an electric lift, and the organ goes up and down by the same unusual means. The Organ was built in 1927/28 by Henry Hilsdon of Glasgow, and was the second largest organ ever installed in a Scottish Cinema, and the largest to survive past the mid 1930's. Sections of it were actually built in the basement of the theatre, in a room adjacent to the air handling plant (Plenum Plant) and known until 1986 as 'the organ room'. It had a total of 72 stop tabs controlling stops, tonal percussions, traps (atonal percussions), couplers, and tremulants.

This controlled a total of 23 ranks of pipes, 5 ranks of tuned percussions, and 10 atonal percussors, along with 11 'sound effects' controlled by thumb and toe pistons. The organ as built, was classed as either a 3/23 or 3/35ss at that time. It was enlarged in 1971, again in 1973, and again in 1980/81, and ended up with 35 ranks of pipes and 7 ranks of tuned percussions controlled by 186 stop tabs.

In 1993, the Hilsdon Organ was removed from the building. This is now in the possession of the Scottish Theatre Organ Preservation Society at the New Palace Theatre Organ Heritage Centre.

In 1992, the original canopy above the entrance was removed, and at the same time the stage areas were extended and a new area was constructed to improve access to the backstage areas.

Even today, it is impressive walking through the building to see how much of the original fixtures and fittings still exist today. In particular, the main doors



are wood and glass, with brass fittings. There are numerous light fittings with metalwork and opaque glass shells or scallop shapes, both on the main staircase down to stalls, and in auditorium under the upper balcony. The quality of the finishings is noticeable compared to other cinemas of the period, showing the high budget that had been spent to create the largest, most luxurious cinema for Scotland's capital city.

The upstairs cross-corridor leading to the balcony has several alcoves with large stone urns in them (containing flowers).

In the stalls there are several nice large etched-glass lit signage: 'No Smoking', 'Gentlemen' etc. Seats: some have been replaced; most (certainly in the balcony) could be original; with cast iron stanchions between them; and decorative swirls at the end of rows.

The Orchestra pit extends under stage (as in the Theatre Royal Glasgow). There are excellent sightlines, even from very rear of the balcony.

The current decorative scheme is very dark, and somewhat unflattering. Despite this, the building is mainly in good condition, although some unfortunate holes in (non-decorative regions of) plasterwork above the proscenium for chains to hang a lighting grid have been punched through.

Perhaps most importantly, the 'feel' of the building; its character; is completely intact. This was built to be a unique luxurious building worthy of Edinburgh; it was, and remains, Scotland's Picture Palace.

## **Appendix**

### ***Drawings included:***

- **2046-103 Site Location Plan**
- **2046-101 Existing Elevation Greenside Lane**
- **2046-102A Proposed Elevation Greenside Lane**

