

LONDON REVIEW PANEL

Trustee and Interim Capital Project Director
The King's Head Theatre
115 Upper Street, London N1 1QN

May 2023

Dear

London Review Panel: King's Head Theatre

Please find enclosed the London Review Panel report following the design review of the King's Head Theatre on the 16th of May 2023. I would like to thank you for your participation in the review and offer ongoing Mayor's Design Advocate support as the scheme's design develops.

Yours sincerely,

Mayor's Design Advocate

cc.

All meeting attendees

Jules Pipe, Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills

Philip Graham, Executive Director of Good Growth, GLA

Louise Duggan, Head of Regeneration, GLA

LONDON

REVIEW PANEL

Report of London Review Panel meeting for King's Head Theatre

Tuesday 16th May 2023

A site visit took place ahead of the review with a tour and briefings given by the client team and the Design Team.

London Review Panel

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
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[REDACTED]
MDA (Chair)
MDA
MDA

Attendees

[REDACTED]
King's Head Theatre
King's Head Theatre
King's Head Theatre
Cain
LB Islington
Thomas and Adamson
PUP Architects
PUP Architects
GLA Regeneration
GLA Regeneration

Report copied to

Jules Pipe	Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills
Philip Graham	GLA Executive Director of Good Growth
Louise Duggan	GLA Head of Regeneration

Confidentiality and publication

Please note that while schemes not yet in the public domain, for example at a pre-application stage, will be treated as confidential, as a public organisation the GLA is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and in the case of an FOI request may be obliged to release project information submitted for review. Review reports will target publication to the London Review Panel webpage six months following the review unless otherwise agreed.

Overview

The King's Head Pub Theatre (KHT) has been at the heart of Islington since it first opened in 1970, however a key challenge for the organisation was the business model becoming increasingly less sustainable post-pandemic, in addition the current landlords (Youngs Brewery) have made clear their aspirations to develop the site. KHT is an important community asset and registered charity. The investment from the Good Growth Fund has helped to secure a new home, whilst ensuring the Theatre a further life beyond the current site to fulfil the wish of the local community and LGBTQ+ communities. The aim is to evolve to a sustainable LGBTQ+ community asset with a theatre, flexible cafe/bar/workshop space and a programme of "elsewhere" activity. The new building seeks to provide spaces available to meet the needs of the diverse community. Having the increased capacity will enable KHT to attract more and wider audiences to strengthen resilience through partnerships, enhanced fundraising and commercial hires. The deletion of the planned studio from the scheme of works also allows KHT to reappropriate that expenditure to a strand of high impact "elsewhere" activity, sharing the resources of the building with the community beyond their walls. KHT's new cultural programme seeks to ensure that everyone can see themselves reflected on stage and feel they have a voice, bringing together diverse communities in an area of great wealth disparity, whilst supporting regeneration and wellbeing.

London Review Panel's Views

Summary

The panel commend the team on their ambition for this project which includes plenty of exciting opportunities and challenges. The panel are encouraged that this team are committed to delivering a cultural hub that will engage a variety of users. The panel can see the team are committed to achieving rich and meaningful outcomes for this community. The panel see there are many positive initiatives to build on. The panel understand this is an important project for LB Islington and needs to be delivered successfully.

The project needs to consider the entrance sequence and how to draw footfall and potential visitors in from Upper Street. The group has a collective ambition to draw in diverse audiences to the theatre and the MDAs encouraged true engagement from a range of communities, stakeholders and potential patrons as a key starting point that manifests through the whole project.

The project should maintain a flexible layout to adapt to a wide range of activities and destinations in the building. The project should aim to be as accessible as possible and use a focus group to ensure that all bases are covered. The project team should think about pinch points and circulation through the building to ensure navigation and wayfinding are clear for new audiences. Capacity and flows were tested at Stage 3 and further consideration should be given to the capacity of the front of house space.

1. Public welcome and arrival experience

The panel recommend the team carefully consider the entrance, thresholds, and entry experience, especially around the forecourt to the theatre

- The panel recommend that there are creative ways to get the community in through the door and make sure there are no barriers to entry that have not yet been thought about.
- The MDAs encouraged the project team to understand where the threshold is. If it is out past the red door, that is where potential design interventions can be delivered. The group discussed that the outside space is within the scope of this project. It is important for the team to understand the sense of arrival for visitors. The MDAs discussed creative interventions to indicate arrivals, such as a making a different pattern in the pavers to draw people through the threshold. Low level signage can also be an asset within the development. The group discussed multilingual signage as an example of a way to draw different groups into the development.
- The MDAs encouraged the team to think of the role of the entrance as a safe space for visitors and how to welcome people in from the entrance space. There is a sequence in the entrance lobby that is reasonably quick and the group discussed how to welcome people into a transient space. This is also a small space, so there is a potential for a bottleneck. Potential visitors need to feel welcome and invited into the space at the start and heart of the user experience. The MDAs discussed this entrance sequence further and discussed that as there is not currently any eye contact that will occur with the current layout. Once people come into the main lobby, there is an opportunity for something like a screen (or a similarly less subtle substitute) to display the key principles of the theatre. This can help guide people through the space in the absence of eye contact welcoming people into the space.
- The MDAs recommend that the team develop a clear vision for the yard space as part of the projects scope. The MDAs would welcome the opportunity to see a proposal for this space and its role in welcoming people into the building
- The team discussed an ambition to maintain a flexibility in the space that means it can be completely devoid of alcohol. The MDAs recommend that the team develop a clear strategy for how the theatre can support alcohol free spaces and programming. The panel recommend that the project team maintain flexibility of the level one space and ensure that is welcoming for everyone.
- Currently, the entrance into the development signals toward high end shops and F&B. There needs to be a way to draw people from all backgrounds in from the street into the theatre, not just visitors to those exclusive shops.

The panel encourage the team to further develop wayfinding through the building and consider complex issues with navigation

- The group discussed the project's wayfinding plan. The MDAs encouraged the design team to think about the staircase as a key element and think about how someone could be brought through the different levels in a bolder, more uniform way. The elements referencing the staircase could be expressed and brought out into the forecourt to draw potential visitors into the space. The MDA's encouraged the project team to look at the wayfinding from the perspective of someone who has never been to the theatre and encouraged the team members to think back to their first experience at the theatre and what could have been better. The MDAs emphasized that it is never too early to do consultation on this.
- The MDAs discussed wayfinding on the stairs and brought in the public's perceptions of the theatre which included being a playful space. The MDAs encouraged creative,

playful ways of wayfinding on the stairs, such as labelling “almost there, nearly there.” In response to the cave-like, descend into the main theatre space.

- The MDAs commended the team for the movable furniture. They encouraged an honesty in drawing where furniture is going and committing to a layout of the pink room and then critiquing it under the lens of the entrance sequence, a personable welcome and eye contact.
- The panel recommend that the project team be open to the possibility of needing to modify once the building is in use, for example, potentially needing to increase the number of POS/bar points.
- The group emphasized that as long as there is an ability to capture feedback, the team can learn from it and modify their approaches to visitor navigation through the building.

2. Engagement and consultation

- The panel recommend that the project teamwork with the community in as much of a flexible way as possible. There is an opportunity to engage with the artistic community to better develop the spaces of the theatre. The MDAs discussed how engaging with artists from Islington could be a great way to help design the entrance and entry into the building. It was discussed how giving a meaningful aspect of this over to local artists can be generous to the local community and add richness to the project.
- The project team have demonstrated an understanding of the theatre landscape in London and identified a clear need for young writers as a key way to bring in people to the theatre who may not otherwise go to the theatre.
- The group discussed family programming, consulting with school groups, parents, etc. in order to build connections to the programming of the theatre and bring people in that are not just visitors to the developments retail attractions.
- The MDAs discussed using soft openings for events for the community to comment on what works and doesn't work in the space.
- The panel recommend that the team reach out to all ethnic groups to address feedback given by the public on perceptions of the theatre.

The panel recommend the project team focuses on intergenerational connections and draw in older, non-traditional theatre goers

- The group discussed engaging with school groups and family. The project team are already in conversation with such groups and there is a clear ambition to bring in intergenerational connections to the space. The group discussed how the cabaret space and smaller space is trying to adhere to intergenerational programming.
- The MDAs recommended testing the design with older people, young mums, etc. There is a need to do meaningful community consultation to see how the design will affect use in a GLA funded project. The MDAs emphasized the need for a space where older people are able to come on their own and to populate the space with people's opinions of how it can be used.
- The group discussed being in conversation with Islington pensioners center and getting a focus group together to ask open questions about how the space will be used. The MDAs discussed how this can be a great way to enhance the feel of the

theatre and allow for community members to have real ownership over certain elements.

The panel recommend consulting disabled residents to better understand how the space works with a variety of users

- The panel recommend that the project team think about a wide spectrum of disability and think about disabled users who may not just be wheelchair users. The panel recommend that the project team think about how disabled people's needs and experiences are integral in design.
- The group emphasized starting engagement as soon as possible and understand how this might influence and be accommodated in the project.
- The project team are looking to invest more in induction loops, captioning, braille signage, and more in order to be as accessible as possible. They also discussed an ambition to invite the Arts Council Disabilities Czar to the space to comment.
- There is an opportunity with wayfinding and signage to be more disability friendly as an integral feature to the design.

3. Circulation and pinch points

The panel recommend that the project team undertake modelling exercises to better understand how people will move throughout the building at different times

- The group discussed that the theatre's capacity will increase from 100 to 250 people. There is an ambition to keep the energy of having a smaller space that is focused on the fringe theatre scene.
- The group discussed needing to understand the floor space, as well as breakout spaces and pinch points in terms of escape and circulation. The MDAs recommended understanding how people are drawn into the foyer of the building and modelling how people move through the various spaces and levels of the building. The group emphasized that the team have created a design with lots of destinations. These various destinations, the characterisation of those spaces, and how overspill will be managed needs to be understood.
- The MDAs further emphasized the need to sense check the capacity and flow modelling to understand the impacts to/on the current design. The team should understand the break out capacity of the spaces, particularly before and during the interval of performances.

Next Steps

It is clear the project team are aware of potential issues with the current proposal and are dealing with them adequately, picking up on nuances of the space. The MDAs encourage the project team to address the recommendations made during the session and continue to develop the designs and programming of the space with lessons from further engagement undertaken. It is understood that the interface between the programming of the space has the ability to dovetail with the Public Welcome elements to deliver some of this wider testing as the project progresses and at appropriate milestones.