

Section 4 – Information to support the nomination

Please state your reasons for thinking that the Council should conclude that the property is of Community Value and provide as much information as you can to support your application.

90 Years of Social Activity

Streatham Hill Theatre has been furthering social interests and social well-being since opening in 1929 and has moved with the social and economic changes since then, encompassing cultural, entertainment and recreational offerings for the community. The book *Streatham Hill Theatre, the story of a suburban theatre* by John Cresswell, [published in 2000 by The Streatham Society, ISBN 0 9504431 6 6] tells the theatre's story in great detail. The Arthur Lloyd theatre history website also has more information and photographs at <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Streatham.htm>.

The theatre was built as part of Streatham's 'centre of culture', joined by the adjacent Gaumont cinema and Locarno ballroom, and the close-by ABC and Astoria, all adding to Streatham's reputation as the 'West End of South London'. The Gaumont, Locarno and ABC are all now gone as a result of redevelopment, and the Astoria, once a cinema theatre is now a multi-screen Odeon. Streatham Hill Theatre is the only part of that 'centre of culture' that remains.

Designed by renowned theatre architect W. G. Sprague (his last work) and W. H. Barton, the theatre was granted a Grade 2 listing in 1994 as "*an unusually lavish example of a theatre built in the short-lived revival of building in 1929-30; as a suburban example of this date the building may be unique*". [Ref: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1244564>]

Streatham Hill Theatre disseminated quality theatre, variety, pantomime, opera and ballet to local audiences, and brought in stars of stage and screen to appear there. Some of those stars moved to the newly built mansion blocks along the high road, assisted by the tram service to central London, adding another epithet to Streatham as the 'Beverly Hills of South London'. The theatre was a touring venue, receiving transfers from the West End prior to a tour, or as the last date of a tour prior to a West End run. It could stage the very largest shows, having a large stage and audience capacity of 2500. For example Ivor Novello's production of Noel Coward's *Cavalcade* transferred there after its run at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and he was able to replicate the sinking of the *Titanic* on the Streatham Hill stage.

Early in wartime, the theatre became a base for exiled companies from the West End, such as the Old Vic, and was often the first London showing for incoming productions. As the war progressed a mixed programme kept the local population entertained, until a flying bomb struck the theatre on 3rd July 1944 closing it for the duration. Post-war rebuilding was delayed due to a shortage of materials, but the theatre reopened in December 1950 with the pantomime *Cinderella* launching its revived programme of touring shows.

During the 1950's, the rise of TV and new social activities such as bingo led to a lessening of demand for theatre, resulting in a change of the building's main use, while retaining the focus on social interests and entertainment. In 1962, the building closed and quickly reopened as the flagship Mecca Social Club. While focused around bingo, the club was a real social centre, offering bars and restaurants, and other entertainments including pantomimes, shows and wrestling. Since then, through a range of operators, the building continued to provide a social club built on bingo.

Recent Activity

In recent years, theatre and the arts for the community have returned to the building with support from the operators Beacon Bingo. The building has hosted theatre, music and film performances, art exhibitions and workshops. For example, the local open-access Streatham Theatre Company has performed both new and published works, including site-specific productions performed around the building, and led guided tours of the building. The Streatham Festival and the Streatham Film Festival have both staged events there. In addition, the building has been home to a number of artists in rooms no longer in use for the public.

As an example, the following are some of the recent events, with attendance numbers where available:

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- Streatham Festival 2013 was based in the building, hosting arts exhibitions and workshops, sell-out theatre performances of 'Then and Now: the Glamour Days of Streatham', and a guided tour (see photo below, left) which attracted over 160 people.
- 'Access all Eras' site-specific performances and tours in 2014 (two photos, centre).
- 'Breaking the Code' performances in 2015 attended by approx. 200 (photo, right).
- 'The Devil Rides Back' site-specific performances and tours in 2015 attended by over 125.
- Gala nights including music, cocktails and guided tours.
- 'Shakespeare Plays: Bingo' site-specific performances and tours in 2016.
- Streatham Film Festival showings.
- 'Women and War' arts festival in 2017, attracting participants from UK and overseas.



Theatre at Risk

Recently it has been bingo's turn for decline, seen as 'old fashioned' and being largely replaced by online gaming. While still being attended by regulars as a social activity, the numbers declined and Beacon Bingo took the decision to close their bingo operation at Streatham Hill in January 2017, retaining only a slot machine lounge.

This has left the majority of the building unused, and no longer accessible to the community. Previously popular community theatre productions and tours can no longer take place.

Since closure, Beacon Bingo's owners Praesepe plc have been seeking an arts or cultural operator to take over the building. However, other similar buildings have been taken over by pub chains or churches, thereby losing their arts and cultural use, and restricting their community use.

A range of potential commercial operators have enquired about the building, including those with theatre, live music and nightclub offerings, but so far we are unaware of any progressing to offers. Issues have included location and perceived distance from central London, venue size, noise constraints and planning restrictions. A proposal by an arts club for a feasibility study into use of the building as their base and a venue was not accepted.

There have been offers from companies hoping to re-develop the site, which would permanently deprive the community of the building. While the Grade 2 listing and Lambeth's zoning for entertainment use could delay approval for redevelopment, it could happen if the building is left unused for a period and the developer can justify over-riding the constraints. If left unused, the building risks rapid deterioration and damage from the elements, vandals, fire etc.

The Theatres Trust placed Streatham Hill Theatre on their Theatres at Risk register in 2018, stating:

- "...it is feared that the current owner may have plans for redevelopment. There is also concern that if the more saleable parts of the building are let or developed separately – such as for offices or flats – the auditorium itself may be left in an unsustainable position, without the income it would need from the rest of the building."
- "Whilst a theatre of such a size [2500 seats] is unlikely to be viable at this time, it would lend itself to adaptation for smaller-scale and/or studio style performances which would preserve the historic significance of this beautiful building. By also using the range of ancillary spaces, the building would function well as a multi-purpose arts centre and home for community and arts organisations, supported by bar/café/restaurant facilities open to the public."

[Ref: <http://www.theatrust.org.uk/how-we-help/theatres-at-risk/484-streatham-hill-theatre>]

A potential active social future

The local community have a deep affection for this 'sleeping beauty' in their midst and events in the building over the past few years have always been popular. They also have concerns about the future of the building and have formed The Friends of Streatham Hill Theatre as a focus for their interest in returning the theatre to an arts and performance use for the benefit of the community.

The building has only recently closed (Jan 2017), and it remains very much unchanged from its original form. As well as the beautiful auditorium and front of house areas, the stage machinery is largely intact, and there are considerable ancillary areas which could be brought into use.

It would be a relatively inexpensive and short timescale project to return it to arts and cultural use for the benefit of the community. It would complement the new, small-scale theatre built nearby (Streatham Space Project) as part of the London Square development on the site of the former dance hall (Locarno to Caesars) and bowling alley (former Gaumont cinema). Together these would be a new focus for arts and culture in the area, reviving and reinvigorating the former 'centre of culture'.

There is a great opportunity for a 'quick-win' to continue the furtherance of the social interests and well-being of the community provided by Streatham Hill Theatre. In the meantime, it would be possible to continue the type of events held over the past few years.

While it may no longer be feasible to operate a 2500 seat venue full time in Streatham, the building can be adapted (without losing its heritage) to provide a range of facilities supporting a wide range of inclusive arts and cultural activities.

Multipurpose auditorium spaces, along with bars and cafes, can support performances and rehearsals (e.g. theatre/dance/film/music/spoken word), events such as exhibitions, festivals, ceremonies, conferences and seminars, as well as activities such as workshops for training and education. London-based, national and international organisations can be invited to use the building to once again disseminate quality productions to the community.

Within the building, there is considerable ancillary space which can be used to support a creative 'hub' with offices and studios for artists, arts organisations, local organisations, charities, small businesses etc., as well as an incubator for innovation and growth. Shared facilities will support networking between all users, fostering opportunities for mentoring and synergistic activities. This centre brings greater opportunities to access arts and culture in the south of the borough.

An example of what might be achieved here is the Battersea Arts Centre, based in a former town hall where "*people come to be creative, see a show, explore local heritage, visit the bar, play or relax*". [Ref: https://www.bac.org.uk/content/37376/about/about_us/about_us]

Another example is in Waltham Forest where the council has purchased the disused Granada cinema for conversion into a theatre to be run by the Soho Theatre charity. Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London, says "*I welcome this fantastic news about a much loved and iconic entertainment venue. London's cultural heritage is the foundation of why people love to live, visit and do business here and this investment just adds to Waltham Forest's cultural infrastructure as the first ever London Borough of Culture*".

One approach is to find an existing arts or cultural organisation willing and able to take on the building and sympathetically restoring or modifying it to suit their needs. This might be a commercial business or a larger non-profit organisation. The Friends would hope that such an organisation would consult with and include the community in their plans for the building and its offerings.

An alternative is for the community to take over the building and revive it for community and social use with a full range of creative arts and cultural activities, supporting social inclusion. There are many such activities running in Streatham, including the arts Festival, Food Festival, Peace Festival etc. as well as many participative community groups such as choirs and theatre companies, all needing space. Local schools, colleges and youth organisations would also benefit from access to such comprehensive facilities and community resources.

The centre and its offerings will contribute to '*Destination Streatham*', an initiative to bring people to a renewed centre for arts, culture, food and drink (for both night-time and day-time activity). There are also many quality restaurants, cafes and bars nearby offering a wide choice of dining at reasonable prices.

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Theatres have been shown to form a core element of so called 'place-making', bringing footfall and discretionary spend, echoing Streatham's role as the '*West End of South London*' in earlier times.

Transport links from right across south London to Streatham Hill are now good with National Rail and London Overground services from London Victoria and London Bridge, via Clapham Junction, Balham (for Northern Line), Croydon and Crystal Palace, plus regular bus services to Brixton (for Victoria Line). A visit to Streatham is a better value for money alternative to travelling into town.

Time to Act

There is a small window of opportunity to turn this unique, beautiful and irreplaceable building, with its unique heritage of social involvement over nearly 90 years, into a new arts and cultural focus for the people of Streatham and surrounding areas.

Recognising the Streatham Hill Theatre as an Asset of Community Value is the first step on the journey of securing its future for the social benefit of the people. The Friends of Streatham Hill Theatre have started that journey and would like to see it to its conclusion.

We believe that Lambeth Council should conclude that the Streatham Hill Theatre is an Asset of Community Value (ACV) as we have shown above that:

- The main use of the building has furthered the social interests and social wellbeing of the local community over its lifetime, adapting to those needs over time.
- It is realistic or reasonable to think that there can continue to be a main use which will continue to further the social interests and social wellbeing of the local community, adapting again to meet those changing needs.

Our supporters in this belief include:

- The Theatres Trust
- Association of British Theatre Technicians (through their Historic Research Committee)
- Streatham Society, our civic and heritage forum
- Streatham Action, our civic forum
- John Cresswell, author of *The Streatham Hill Theatre, The story of a suburban theatre*
- Streatham Theatre Company
- Streatham Action, our neighbourhood forum
- Chuka Umunna, MP for Streatham
- Local Lambeth councillors
- Local arts practitioners
- The Friend's members from Streatham, Lambeth and the wider arts community (over 200 to date)
- Our constantly growing number of social media followers (over 700 to date)

Examples of other local successful ACV applications include:

- Granada Cinema Theatre, Tooting, now Gala Bingo, listed by Wandsworth in 2017. This building has many similarities to Streatham Hill Theatre. <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/GranadaTooting.htm>
- Royal Vauxhall Tavern, listed by Lambeth in 2017