

**FORMER RIALTO CINEMA
SOUTH CIRCULAR ROAD
DUBLIN 8**

CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT

6th June 2019

**Historic Building Consultants
Old Bawn
Old Connaught
Bray**

987/01

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Background

This report has been prepared for Shipsey Barry Architects as part of the documentation to be submitted with a planning application.

The site was inspected for the purposes of preparing this report on 6th April 2018 on which occasion the photographs incorporated in the report were taken and the site examined to prepare the descriptions contained therein.

Historical research was carried out on the background history of the property and the results are set down below.

While this report contains comment on aspects of the condition of the buildings it is not a condition report or a structural report and must not be read as such.

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Historical background

The Circular Road was laid out around Dublin in the later eighteenth century. However, very little development occurred along the road, either to the north of the city or to the south, for many years, partly because it was outside the built-up area of the city and partly because it was a toll road. Once the tolls were removed in the 1850s opportunities for development followed, particularly in those areas where the development of the city had reached the Circular Road. This happened in the south-eastern part of Dublin first of all and gradually spread to other parts of the road. As late as the mid-twentieth century some sites remained undeveloped.

At Dolphin's Barn a substantial tract of land was still open between the Grand Canal and South Circular Road in the 1930s. The last open element of street frontage of this site along South Circular Road in the Dolphin's Barn area was closed in 1935 when the land was developed for a cinema. When the rest of the land was developed nearly twenty years later to provide social housing houses on the road frontage had to be demolished in order to gain access.



Plate 1: Rialto Cinema at the time of its opening in 1936

The cinema in question was the Rialto, which opened its doors in 1936, with 1,600 seats, which was large for a suburban cinema of its day. The cinema had a gallery, but it was relatively small, mainly located over offices at the rear of the auditorium and with a modest overhanging balcony. The photograph above shows the cinema at this time, with the two shops as yet unoccupied and with the façade faced with brick detailing.

The cinema was in operation for thirty-four years, seeing its peak in 1961 when the *Guinness Book of World Records* listed Ireland as having the highest cinema attendance rate in the world. At the end of that year Telefís Éireann was launched and cinema attendances began to slide.

The Rialto managed to keep going until 1970 before it finally closed its doors in August of that year.



Plate 2: Windsor Motors, 2003

The property was acquired by Windsor Motors, who converted the former cinema to a car showroom. This involved the construction of new concrete floors within the building to provide for multiple levels of car storage and to facilitate this, concrete ramps were constructed to link one level to the next.

Conservation context

Record of Protected Structures

The former Rialto Cinema is not a protected structure. In January 2016, when a previous planning application was under consideration with An Bord Pleanála, it was stated in one of the reasons for refusal that “It is proposed to add the front elements of the Rialto Cinema to the record of protected structures”. However, when the Dublin City Development Plan, 2016-2022 was adopted at the end of that year the cinema building was not included in the record of protected structures. In January 2018 a revised record of protected structures was published, with a significant number of additions and deletions; however, the Rialto Cinema was not added to the record at that stage either.

Conservation areas

The former Rialto Cinema is not within a conservation area. The cinema is indicated by the green ellipse on the detail of the development plan map reproduced below.

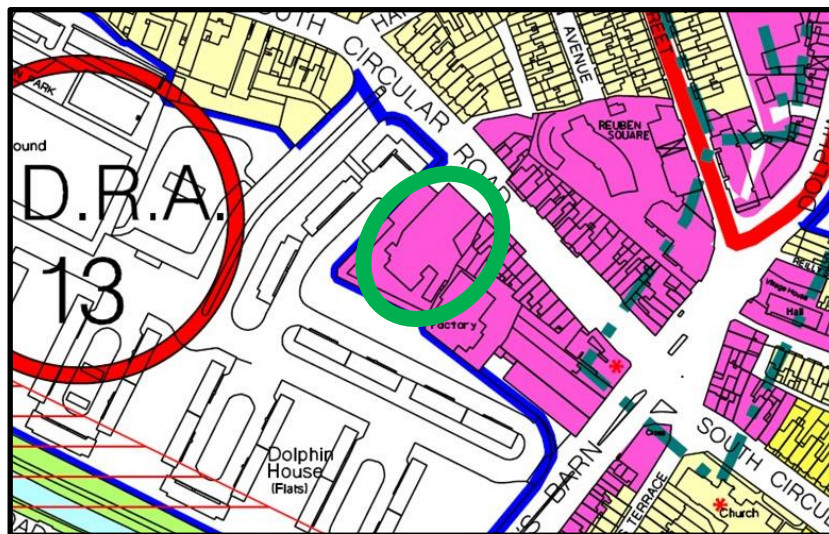


Figure 1: Detail of development plan map E

National Inventory of Architectural Heritage

The former Rialto Cinema is included in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, which assigns a Regional significance for its architectural, historical and social interest. The appraisal states that “This former cinema is an imposing presence on South Circular Road, signifying the social importance cinemas once had in suburban areas.”

Building survey



Plate 3: Front of former cinema, seen from north-west

The former Rialto Cinema is a substantial building fronting on to the southern side of South Circular Road to the west of the crossroads at Dolphin's Barn. The building is three-storey at the front and faced with a mix of brick and roughcast render, all of which has been painted. The building is in a modified Art Deco style.



Plate 4: Front of former cinema, seen from north-east

The ground floor and first floor are set back slightly from the street, aligning with the adjacent residential properties. The second floor is set back from the rest of the frontage. The western side of the building is faced with red machine-made brick, while the eastern elevation, originally less visible, is faced with a cheaper yellow Dolphin's Barn brick.

Interior

Ground floor



Plate 5: View into cinema from entrance

The entrance to the cinema is in the centre of the front façade and leads in to a foyer above which there is a coved ceiling with central lantern. On either side of this foyer were shops, with shopfronts onto the street and with separate access from the foyer. To the rear of the shops a staircase leads up to the left. There is a second staircase to the right, enclosed behind a door. Beyond the staircases a desk of 1970s vintage sits on the left-hand side, while on the right a room leads off the foyer. At the rear a large opening leads into the auditorium.



Plate 6: View to front of foyer

The interior of the building is in very poor condition as a result of vandalism. It is also smoke-blackened from a fire, that has impacted part of the ground floor area.



Plate 7: Room leading off foyer

Each of the several spaces that leads off the main foyer at ground level is relatively plain and for the most part these rooms or spaces have been fitted out in the later twentieth century as part of the conversion to motor showrooms. The fit-out includes suspended ceilings and, in some places, wall panels. These areas include the two shops, the interiors of which were also plain and devoid of particular architectural interest.



Plate 8: Room leading off foyer

These rooms have been extensively vandalised, with ceilings damaged and partially fallen, wires ripped out and other damage.



Plate 9: View of auditorium from the foyer

There is nothing left in the former auditorium area to signify its original use. A new floor has been inserted above the ground floor level, supported on mass concrete columns and below which there is a suspended ceiling. The floor in this area is not raked but is level and of mass concrete.



Plate 10: View from former stage area towards foyer

As with the rooms previously described, this area has been vandalised, with the ceilings ripped down and wires ripped out.

Staircases

There are two staircases in the building, both in the front section, immediately to the rear of the shops. The stair on the left on entering the cinema was the main staircase, giving access to the balcony on the upper floor. The other staircase gave access to the top floor, but had no door leading off the foyer.

Both staircases are very plain, the only nod to decoration being a series of vaulted ceilings, with some simple brackets and subtle changes in texture on the wall facings.

Plate 11: Bottom flight of main stair



Plate 12: Entry from main stairs to first floor



The principal staircase has a covering of carpet tiles, beneath which the original covering may be found – consisting of linoleum tiles in green and yellow, simulating terrazzo.

Plate 13: Linoleum on staircase

First floor

Plate 14: First floor lobby

At first floor level there is a lobby with a coved ceiling. Part of this has been partitioned off to provide office space for the car dealer, though the partitioning is low, and the full extent of the ceiling is visible. The lobby extends beneath a beam to a window in the front elevation, now boarded up. Passageways on either side of the partitioning lead to the site of the original balcony.



Plate 15: First floor lobby, with window at right

At the front of the lobby doorways lead into offices on either side, at the front of the building, both of which are plain rooms. The door at left in the photograph above gives access to the second staircase. The narrowness of this doorway and the steps leading to it indicate that this was not a public stairway.



Plate 16: Office at front of first floor

The photograph above shows one of the offices at the front of the building, with the boarded-up window at left. As noted above, this is a plain room, with no decorative detailing.



Plate 17: Toilets at first floor level

To the rear of the staircases there are toilets. The partitions have moulded timber architraves, which suggests that they are part of the original 1930s building. The sanitary ware is of more recent date, as is the counter top into which the wash basins are set. The lower parts of the walls are tiled, while the upper parts are roughcast rendered.



Plate 18: Concrete ramp at first floor

At the rear of the foyer there is a concrete ramp, running up towards the upper floor. This is clearly part of the 1970s conversion for use as a car showroom, at which time the concrete floors were inserted.



Plate 19: Concrete ramp at first floor



Plate 20: Office at rear of ramp

Beyond the ramp the building opens out into a large space, divided by concrete columns that support the concrete upper floor. To one side an office is partitioned off from the main floor and to the side there is a roller shutter, giving access to an external ramp, which provides access for cars to be brought up to this level.



Plate 21: View to rear of first floor

Second floor



The second floor is accessed via either staircase. The main staircase has a small section at the top that leads to rooms at the front of the building.

The secondary, non-public, staircase gives access to the upper floor, where it is possible that there was an upper balcony, though the poor access to the staircase suggests otherwise.

This is a very plain staircase, lacking the vaulting of the main stairs. It is of concrete, without the linoleum covering.

Plate 22: Secondary staircase

A doorway at the top of the secondary staircase leads to a short flight of steps, set at an angle, and leading to a small door at the top. This door gave access to the projection room. No access to this room was possible during the survey, as the door was locked. A view through the keyhole indicated that there is no surviving projection equipment in the room.

Plate 23: Door to projection room

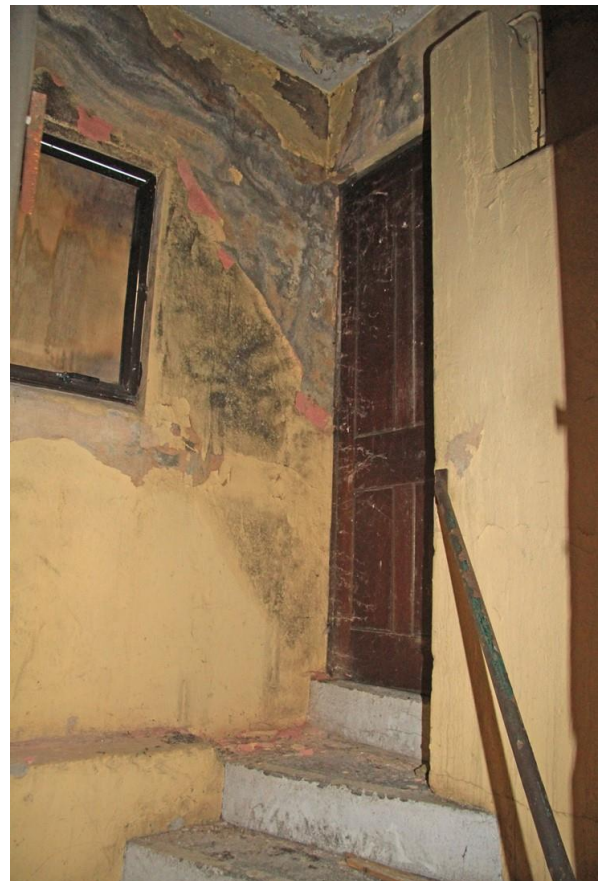




Plate 24: Offices on second floor

The secondary staircase leads to offices on the second floor. These are partitioned off from the main space and are part of the 1970s conversion to motor showroom. The floor is concrete.



Plate 25: Offices on second floor

This area has been extensively vandalised. There is also a significant amount of water damage arising from leaks in the roof.



Plate 26: View to front at second floor level

At the rear of the second floor is another substantial concrete floor, accessed via the car ramp and evidently used for storing cars. The space has an arched ceiling covering most of the area, though this is missing in the rear section. The roof structure is visible and consists of steel trusses supporting a profiled steel roof above and a curved ceiling below.



Plate 27: View to rear at second floor level

There is a significant amount of water on the floor, arising from leaks in the roof.

Assessment

The front part of the original cinema building survives relatively intact, though damaged to a significant extent by vandalism, fire, smoke and water. Externally, the brickwork at the front has been painted over, though the rest of the building is extant, with the exception of the windows and doorway to the front. The windows at the side have been stopped up with concrete blockwork.

Internally, the vandalism has resulted in damage that has mainly affected the 1970s partitioning and ceilings. The fire has also damaged those elements, though it may also have affected original rooms – it is difficult to be certain, though the probability is that the damaged areas were also part of the 1970s fit-out.

The auditorium has been comprehensively divided through the insertion of two concrete floors, together with concrete ramps. The balcony was removed at this stage – it is possible that there were two balconies, though none survive, even in part.

The only significant internal elements to survive and to show some kind of decorative intent are the ground floor foyer and the first-floor lobby, each with its coved ceiling – though the two ceilings are quite different. As noted in the survey, there is a modest level of decoration in the main stairway, with the simple vaulted ceilings and one or two relatively plain brackets.

When compared with some of the city-centre cinemas the Rialto was simple in its décor and relatively cheap in its construction. On the other hand, it was a large cinema when compared with some other suburban cinemas and in its day it did not need internal decorative effects in order to attract a significant audience. It served the area well during the boom years of cinema from 1936 to 1970, while providing a landmark building on South Circular Road.

Proposed development

It is proposed to develop the site to provide student accommodation. This would involve the demolition of the former auditorium at the rear of the building, while retaining the front section.

The retained part of the building would include the lobbies on the ground and first floors and the staircases and rooms leading to the sides of the lobbies, as well as the space above on the second floor.

The new development would provide a cruciform building attached at the rear of the retained part of the cinema. This would be six storeys in height, with the top storey set back from the main elevations. The highest point of the new building would be slightly higher than the top of the gable on the front of the cinema – by 2.34 metres, and this would be set back from the frontage by 3.6 metres, as discussed below. There would also be additions to either side of the cinema frontage and these would be kept to three storeys, with a parapet to the front, such that the parapet level would be well below the parapet at the front of the cinema.

It is proposed to clean the paint off the brickwork on the front of the building so as to return it to its original appearance. The methodology for the removal of the paint will depend on the nature and chemical composition of the paint and it is intended that a specialist masonry cleaning company would be engaged to fulfil this part of the project. It is likely that removal will involve some form of chemical poulticing, but this will not be confirmed until detailed testing is carried out to determine the nature of the paint and hence to select the most effective means of removal. The impact of the system of removal on the surface quality of the brick will be an important element in this decision.

Conservation assessment

The intention to retain the front section of the cinema building will ensure that this significant element of the streetscape remains and will stand as a reminder of an important element in the mid-twentieth century history of the Dolphin's Barn area. This will reflect the assessment in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage that the building is of architectural, historical and social interest. That the foyers and staircases will remain in use for their original purpose is a further factor in favour of this being retained.

The auditorium to the rear has been heavily altered, with the removal of the balcony or balconies and the subdivision through the insertion of new concrete floors and ramps. If there were ever any Art Deco decorative elements in the auditorium area they are now missing. The auditorium contributes little or nothing to the streetscape and its loss would not result in any negative impact on the character of the area.

The proposed new buildings would not detract from the retained element of the cinema. The additions on either side of the frontage would be lower than the main building and designed to blend in without resorting to pastiche. As a result, they would be subservient to the cinema, while closing the gaps in the streetscape.

The addition to the rear would be narrower than the present auditorium structure until further back into the site, where the building would widen out to establish the cruciform shape. This ensures that the building at the rear would be subservient to the front, as seen from the street, particularly as the view of the building would be partially masked by the new additions on the street frontage. The height of the new building would exceed that of the gable of the cinema by 2.34 metres. However, it would be set back at a significant distance – 3.6 metres – from the street frontage such that the new six-storey building would be largely concealed in the view from South Circular Road, while the cinema front would remain as the dominant element on the frontage of the site. This is seen in the image below.



Plate 28: CGI image showing new building behind retained front section

Comparison with previous proposal

Dublin City Council made a decision to grant planning permission for the development proposed in 2015 and the inspector's report on appeal recommended that permission be granted. The inspector did not make an issue out of the heritage significance of the building and in making its decision on the appeal An Bord Pleanála went against the inspector's recommendation and refused permission for two reasons. The first reason related to height, scale and bulk, while the second referred to architectural heritage. The second reason reads as follows:

It is proposed to add the front elements of the Rialto Cinema to the record of protected structures. The Board is not satisfied that the proposed alterations appropriately reflect the architectural heritage of the original design. Furthermore, the Board considers that the proposed development is over-dominant and would be visually obtrusive in relation to the front elements of the existing building. It is considered that the proposed development would result in the erosion of character of a structure of architectural and social value, would diminish the contribution of the cinema to the streetscape, would seriously injure the amenities of the area and of property in the vicinity, and would be contrary to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

The uses proposed for that building differed from those proposed in the present instance, but it is nonetheless important to consider the earlier decision insofar as it relates to architectural heritage.

There are two critical issues in relation to architectural heritage between that earlier proposal and the present one. The first is that the proposal to add this building to the record of protected structures did not happen. The board's decision was made in January 2016 and at the end of that year Dublin City Council adopted its new development plan without adding the Rialto Cinema to the record of protected structures. Subsequently, in January 2018, a revised record of protected structures for the city was published. This has now removed a significant number of buildings, while adding several buildings that were not previously protected. The Rialto Cinema has not been added to the record of protected structures.



Figure 2: Proposal – retained fabric and demolitions

The second issue relates to the design of the present proposal. The previous proposal would have demolished all but the front wall of the cinema, with the two short flanking walls at each end of the façade. The present proposal is that the entire front section of the cinema would be retained and brought back into use and not just the façade – as indicated in red in the extract above from the architects'

design statement. The portions shown in grey represent the demolitions of the car showroom/cinema elements, while the orange shows later additions to the façade and to the side that would be removed. By contrast, the previous proposal would only have kept those areas marked in blue in the copy of the plans and section reproduced below. As the diagram shows, this includes only the external walls of the very front portion of the building. None of the internal features such as the staircases, the coved ceilings, the entrance foyer and so forth would have been retained. Furthermore, it is now intended to clean the façade to return it to its original brick-faced form.

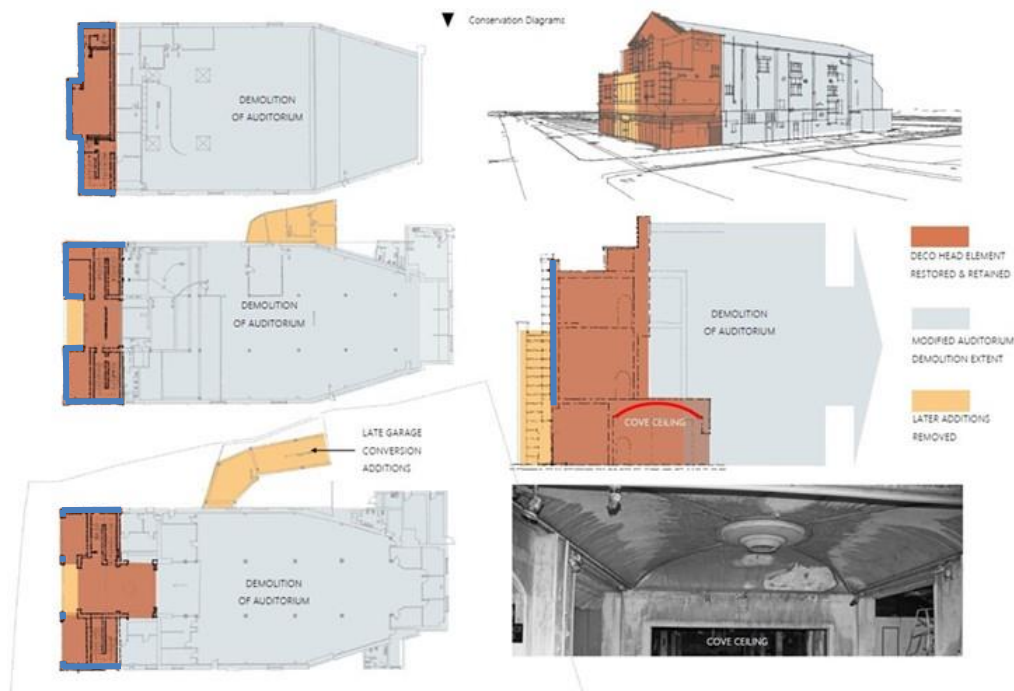


Figure 3: Elements to be retained under previous proposal shown in blue

The development now proposed would be neither as high nor as wide as the previous building proposed at the point where it meets the original cinema frontage. As a result, it will be considerably less visible from the street and hence would have a much lesser impact on the streetscape. The height of the building to the rear of the retained parts of the cinema has been carefully designed, along with the distance back from the frontage, to ensure that it would be visible only from limited locations, while the facing materials have been selected to ensure that the former cinema remains the dominant part of the building frontage. This approach is seen in the images submitted with the application, which show extensive use of glazing in the new structures at the front, while the retained cinema frontage, with its strong facing brick, will be a taller, stronger element, standing out between the lighter, newer elements.

With this new design the second reason for refusal from the previous planning application would no longer apply. The first reason for refusal is outside the scope of the present report as it does not relate to architectural heritage.

At the time of the earlier planning application the building had been vacant for ten years and was not in good condition. Since then there has been a fire in the building and the condition is now worse than it was four years ago. The development now proposed would bring the site back into use while retaining a significant element of the local streetscape and without detracting from the character of the area or of the former Rialto Cinema.