

27 March 2024



Reading
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| Title | PLANNING APPLICATION REPORT |
| Ward | Abbey |
| Planning Application Reference: | 240063/REG3 |
| Site Address: | The Hexagon, Queens Walk, Reading, RG1 7QF |
| Proposed Development | Demolition of some of the existing back of house areas and erection of an extension of the existing Hexagon Theatre to provide a new studio auditorium, flexible rehearsal space, community studio with workshop space and back of house space, along with improved public realm by providing a new podium connection between the new proposed extension and Queens Walk, along with other associated works. |
| Applicant | Reading Borough Council |
| Report author | Thomas Bradfield |
| Deadline: | Original target date: 17/04/2024 |
| Recommendations | Delegate to the Assistant Director for Planning, Transport and Public Protection Services (AD PTPPS) to (i) GRANT full planning permission subject to the satisfactory completion of a Section 106 legal agreement. |
| S106Terms | To either secure a construction phase Employment Skills and Training Plan or an employment and skills contribution of £4,330 towards an Employment and Skills Plan for the construction phase of the development. |
| Conditions | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Full - time limit - three years 2. Approved Plans 3. Materials (samples to be approved prior to commencement of above ground (ie. basement level) works) 4. Mechanical Plant Noise Assessment 5. Noise Mitigation Scheme 6. Air Quality Assessment 7. Contaminated Land Assessment 8. Remediation Scheme (to be submitted) 9. Remediation Scheme (implement and verification) 10. Unidentified Contamination 11. External Lighting 12. Construction Method Statement 13. Hours of Construction 14. No Bonfires on Site 15. Waste and Recycling Storage 16. Sustainable Drainage 17. BREEAM 'Excellent' non-residential Interim |

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| | 18. BREEAM non-residential Post Construction 19. Hard and soft landscaping to be approved 20. Arboricultural Method Statement 21. Green Roofs 22. Biodiversity Enhancements 23. Hours of Operation 24. Use of Roof Restricted 25. Vehicle Parking (as specified) 26. Cycle Parking 27. Use restriction |
| Informatives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive and Proactive • Pre-commencement conditions • Highways • S106 • Terms • Building Regulations • Complaints about construction • Contamination • CIL • Thames Water informatives |

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. The proposal seeks planning permission to extend the Hexagon Theatre to create a new studio auditorium with associated bar and box office, rehearsal space, community space and back of house facilities. The application site currently contains The Hexagon Theatre, and the proposals would replace the existing 'back of house' areas to the north of the main theatre building (currently sited at basement level). The proposal would provide an additional theatre within the town centre, as well as rehearsal space, community use and enhanced back of house areas which would be used by both the existing theatre and the proposed building. The proposals are considered to intensify the theatre use on the site through the addition of a well-designed extension to the existing building. Furthermore, the proposals would provide community space and enhance the existing theatre facilities at The Hexagon. The proposals would result in some harm to the living conditions of the student housing to the north of the proposal site through loss of light, however, when balanced against the significant benefits of the proposal, including fulfilling the policy aims of the Local Plan and supplementary planning documents, it is considered that the proposal is acceptable.

2. Introduction and Site Description

- 2.1. The application site is on the western side of Queens Walk and contains the Hexagon Theatre, which is a multi-purpose theatre and arts venue. The theatre has capacity for 1,686 people (standing events) or 1,200 (seated), and hosts a variety of performances including concerts, drama, comedy, plays and school events. It is the largest cultural venue in Reading. The building has some architectural significance given the elongated hexagonal shape, and the auditorium is created by concrete trusses infilled with standing seam cladding oversailing a solid masonry base. It is a fine example of distinctive 1970's design. It is not Listed, although Historic England (HE) were asked in 2006 and 2021 to consider the building for listing, but HE determined that the criteria for listing were not fulfilled.



- 2.2. The main part of the site contains the theatre itself, with associated bar and café areas surrounding the auditorium. Back of house areas are contained within a part single, part two storey element of the building on the northern part of the site. This area is where the proposed extension would be.
- 2.3. The theatre can be accessed from both the podium level on Queens Walk (the main entrance, pedestrians only) and also from under the podium, which includes 18 parking spaces for employees and performers. There is also an access on the western side of the site from the IDR sliproad, which is used only irregularly used for deliveries, performers and staff.
- 2.4. The theatre originally formed part of the civic heart of Reading, which included the old Civic Centre directly to the south, which has since been demolished, the police station further to the south and the magistrates courts to further to the south east. To the north of the site is Queen's Court (15 Queens Walk), which is a ten storey former office building, now containing students' accommodation. There are a number of windows which serve a variety of rooms (study/bedrooms, stairwells and hallways) which face directly onto south the application site. To the west is the A329 (the IDR), a large dual carriageway, with terraced housing beyond. Directly to the south and east is an area which is known as Minster Quarter, and is one of the key redevelopment sites in Reading Town Centre. Currently there is not a planning application to redevelopment that area, but it is anticipated that this site will come forward for a residential-led mixed use development. To the north east is Broad Street Mall, a large shopping centre, which is currently the subject of a planning application to partially redevelop the site for high-rise residential and adjusted commercial uses (ref. 240173).
- 2.5. The site is within the Central Area as defined by the Local Plan, as well as the West Side Major Opportunity Area, the area covered by the Minster Quarter Outline Development Framework and the Hosier Street Site Allocation (CR12e). It is also within the Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). The Castle Hill/Russell Street/Oxford Road Conservation Area is on the other side of the A329, to the west. The western side of the site is visible from within the Conservation Area along Howard Street.



3. The proposal

- 2.6. The proposal seeks to demolish the existing 1-2 storey back of house area on the northern part of the site and construct an extension to the Hexagon which would contain a new studio auditorium (230 capacity when all seated, 300 when standing) alongside associated bar, box office and circulation space. In addition, a rehearsal space, community space, roof terrace and improved back of house facilities would be provided. A new link from the main entrance of the extension to the existing podium would be provided to allow access at podium level. This would mean that the replacement proposal is equivalent to three storeys, rising from the basement undercroft area, up to a ground floor level, which is at the same grade as the podium, with a first floor above this. The rear access from the A329 sliproad would be reconfigured to allow for large delivery vehicles. The proposal would reduce the number of car parking spaces for staff and performers from 18 to 12, but would retain the 8 disabled persons' spaces. New cycle storage for staff will be provided, where none is currently provided.
- 2.7. The extension would be constructed from a timber frame, glazed and clad in a lightweight metal screen on the Queens Walk side of the site, with a brick built back of house structure on the western side of the site. The design incorporates a natural ventilation tower at roof level, which reflects the name of the theatre in its hexagonal form. Hard and soft landscaping would be provided at podium level around the entrance, and green roofs would be created. The building seeks to attain a BREEAM 'Excellent' energy rating.
- 2.8. The project is part of the combined cultural regeneration project relating to the relocation of the library and extension and improvement of the Hexagon Theatre. The project was agreed to proceed by Policy Committee on 11th July 2022, with a bid for funding from the government's Levelling Up fund submitted in August 2022 and this was confirmed as being successful in January 2023.
- 2.9. The application is referred to Committee as this is a Council-own (Regulation 3) development, and a major scheme due to the amount of floorspace being created.
- 2.10. The application has been supported with the following documents:

- Air Quality Statement
- Contaminated Land Statement
- Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment
- Ecology Statement
- Landscape Statement
- Cover Letter
- Noise Assessment
- Access Statement
- BREEAM Pre Assessment Report
- Daylight/Sunlight Assessment
- Drainage Strategy
- Energy Statement
- Travel Plan
- Planning Statement
- Sustainability Statement
- Transport Statement
- Arboricultural Impact Assessment
- Design and Access Statement
- Existing Plans and Elevations
- Proposed Plans and Elevations
- SUDS Plan
- Swept Path Analysis
- Demolition Plans

4. Planning history

- 2.11. There is currently an application for a Screening Opinion for whether the scheme requires the submission of a separate Environmental Statement due to the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (ref. 230653), but this has been overtaken by the current planning application being considered.
- 2.12. The application site has no other relevant planning history. The theatre itself was constructed around 1977 as has been in continuous use as a theatre since. The red line also includes some land to the south, which was part of the Civic Centre, has been used as allotments, but is now vacant.
- 2.13. This proposal was subject to pre-application discussions with your officers in 2023.
- 2.14. The adjacent building, Queen's Court was converted from office use to 284 student accommodation units and extended by two storeys (ref. 150752) and was latterly re-clad (ref. 190383).

5. Consultations

2.15. The following consultation responses were received from statutory and internal consultees:

RBC Transport Strategy- Additional information was requested relating to cycle storage and swept path analysis for coach drop off points, which was received and found to be acceptable. There are no objections to the proposed development subject to conditions relating to a Construction Method Statement, securing the vehicle parking and securing the cycle parking.

RBC Conservation Officer – No objection to the proposals on heritage grounds.

RBC Environmental Protection – Additional information relating to the air quality and noise mitigation measures was requested and received. No objection subject to the imposition of conditions relating to air quality mitigation, land contamination and noise mitigation measures

RBC Ecology – Additional information was requested relating to the biodiversity calculations and post development habitat plan. This was provided and it was shown that the proposal would achieve a 12.82% Biodiversity Net Gain. No objection subject to conditions to secure biodiversity enhancements and green roofs.

RBC Natural Environment Team (Tree Officer) – No objection subject to the imposition of conditions to secure a landscaping scheme and an arboricultural method statement.

RBC SUDS Manager – Additional information was requested regarding the SUDS layout and was provided. No objection subject to conditions securing the works.

Thames Water – No objection

Public Consultation

2.16. Notification letters were sent to all surrounding occupiers (approximately 500 addresses) on 25 January 2024. Three Site notices were displayed at the site on 31 January 2024. Three responses from neighbours were received, one in support, one objecting and one which requested clarification with regards the impact of the proposals on the South Street Arts Centre.

2.17. The objector raised the following points:

- Loss of daylight/sunlight to the student accommodation to the north at Queen's Court
- Impact/nuisance caused during construction works and upon completion of construction
- Concerns regarding the boundary, land ownership and the impact on the substructure

2.18. The applicant's carried out an extensive public consultation process, meeting directly neighbouring landowners at Queen's Court and Broad Street Mall as well as holding a public exhibition at the Hexagon. The applicant's consultation process raised the following comments:

- Support for a new venue in Reading, in particular a small-scale venue
- Support for development in this area of Reading
- Identifying that accessibility into and within the new theatre building is a high priority
- Comfort within the auditorium is important
- The development should be as sustainable as possible

- Use for amateur and community groups should be incorporated into the proposals
 - An increase in greenery and planting is encouraged
- 2.19. Reading's Economy & Destination Agency (REDA) also commented on the application indicating its support for the proposals.

6. Legal and Planning Policy context

- 2.20. Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires that proposals be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Material considerations include relevant policies in the National Planning Policy framework (NPPF) – among them the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'. However, the NPPF does not change the statutory status of the development plan as 'the starting point for decision making (NPPF paragraph 12).
- 2.21. In this regard, the NPPF states that due weight should be given to the adopted policies of the Local Plan 2019 according to their degree of consistency with the NPPF (the closer the policies in the plan to the policies in the NPPF, the greater the weight that may be given).
- 2.22. Accordingly, the latest NPPF and the following development plan policies and supplementary planning guidance are relevant:

National Policy – National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) December 2023

Section 2 – Achieving Sustainable Development
 Section 4 – Decision Making
 Section 6 – Building a strong, competitive economy
 Section 7 – Ensuring the vitality of town centres
 Section 8 – Promoting healthy and safe communities
 Section 9 – Promoting sustainable transport
 Section 11 – Making Effective Use of Land
 Section 12 – Achieving well-designed and beautiful places
 Section 14 – Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change
 Section 15 – Conserving and enhancing the natural environment
 Section 16 – Conserving and enhancing the historic environment

Reading Borough Local Plan (November 2019):

CC1: Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development
 CC2: Sustainable Design and Construction
 CC3: Adaptation to Climate Change
 CC5: Waste Minimisation and Storage
 CC6: Accessibility and the Intensity of Development
 CC7: Design and the Public Realm
 CC8: Safeguarding Amenity
 CC9: Securing Infrastructure
 EN1: Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment
 EN3: Enhancement of conservation areas
 EN4: Locally Important Heritage Assets
 EN6: New Development in a Historic Context
 EN12: Biodiversity and the Green Network
 EN14: Trees, Hedges and Woodland
 EN15: Air Quality
 EN17: Noise Generating Equipment
 EN18: Flooding and Drainage
 OU1: New and Existing Community Facilities
 TR1: Achieving the Transport Strategy
 TR3: Access, Traffic and Highway-Related Matters
 TR5: Car and Cycle Parking and Electric Vehicle Charging

CR2: Design in Central Reading
CR3: Public Realm in Central Reading
CR4: Leisure, Culture and Tourism in Central Reading
CR12: West Side Major Opportunity Area

RBC Supplementary Planning Documents

Planning Obligations under S106 (2015)
Sustainable Design and Construction (2019)
Parking Standards and Design (2011)
Employment, Skills and Training (2013)
Minster Quarter Area Outline Development Framework (2018)

Other Documents:

Reading's Culture & Heritage Strategy 2015-2030
Site Layout Planning for Daylight and Sunlight: A Guide to Good Practice - BR209, 2022 edition. Known as the BRE Guidelines.

7. Appraisal

The main considerations are:

- Land Use Considerations
- Impact on Neighbours
- Design Considerations – Layout, Scale, Heritage, Appearance, Public Realm and Access
- Highways and Transport
- Natural Environment and Ecology
- Environmental Protection Matters (Air Quality, Noise, SUDS & Contamination)
- Sustainability

Land Use Considerations

- 2.23. Policy CC1 (Presumption in favour of Sustainable Development) requires a positive approach to development proposals that reflect the presumption in favour of sustainable development, which lies at the heart of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). To achieve sustainable development a proposal needs to meet economic, social and environmental objectives.
- 2.24. Policy OU1 supports new, extended or improved community facilities, particularly where this will involve co-location of facilities on a single site. Proposals for on-site intensification of important facilities will be supported, subject to other policies in the plan. The Policy goes on to state that new community facilities should be located where there is a choice of means of travel (including walking and cycling), and in existing centres where possible. Policy CR4 seeks to direct leisure and cultural development to the central area, and states that innovative solutions to make the best use of limited available land would be encouraged.
- 2.25. Local Plan Policy CR12 identifies the West Side Major Opportunity Area, which includes the site. It envisions this part of Reading as a mixed-use extension to the centre of town containing high quality mixed use environments. In particular the site is covered by the CR12e Hosier Street Allocation, which seeks to provide 500-750 dwellings as well as 4,000-6,000sqm of retail and leisure uses. In particular it encourages the retention of the Hexagon theatre, and its improvement.
- 2.26. The Minster Quarter Development Framework (MQDF) covers the site and wider area. It provides a brief for future development of the Minster Quarter area. In relation to this site, it envisions "Hexagon Square" just outside the front of the existing theatre as the heart of the new quarter, and improvements to the Hexagon, particularly with regards the entrance.

- 2.27. The proposal involves the creation of a new theatre space on/adjacent to the existing theatre site, alongside ancillary uses, rehearsal space and dedicated community space. Policy OU1 specifically encourages the co-location of facilities on a single site, and supports the intensification of community and leisure uses in appropriate locations. Furthermore, it seeks to locate new community facilities in locations where there is a choice of means of travel and in existing centres. Policy CC6 supports this aim, stating that the scale density of new development should be appropriate to the level of accessibility. Given the location is highly accessible, it is considered that the site is highly appropriate for this type of development. The proposal would provide a new theatre co-located with the Hexagon, as well as improving the existing theatre through enhanced back of house facilities as well as other spaces within the new building which support both theatres in a sustainable location with access to multiple means of travel.
- 2.28. The proposal would also meet the aspirations of both Local Plan Policy CR12 and the MQDF in providing high quality leisure and community floorspace in the heart of the Minster Quarter, enhancing the existing theatre and providing an improved entrance to the facility at podium level.
- 2.29. The proposal represents an appropriate use in this location, and would provide considerable benefits to the arts and night time economy in Reading town centre. The provision of a new theatre space provides opportunities for additional events that would be more appropriate in a smaller space than the large auditorium in the existing building. The provision of a community studio space and rehearsal space would significantly enhance opportunities for community groups and upcoming performers. The back of house improvements would benefit the existing Hexagon theatre as well as provide functions for the new auditorium. Furthermore, the improvements to Queens Walk would significantly enhance the public realm in line with the policy requirements, and will be discussed in further detail later in the report. Given this, the proposal is considered acceptable in terms of land use.
- 2.30. The consultation process yielded one comment which raised concerns regarding the impact that this proposal would have on the future of the South Street Arts Centre, another small theatre and arts venue in Reading. Whilst this is not a planning consideration, the applicant has confirmed that the proposed facility is in addition to Reading's existing cultural offering, and is not a replacement for other venues.

Impact on Neighbours

- 2.31. Policy CC8 (Safeguarding Amenity) of the Local Plan states that development will not cause a detrimental impact on the living environment of existing residential properties or unacceptable living conditions for new residential properties. Amongst its considerations, the policy highlights access to daylight and sunlight, 'visual dominance' and overbearing effects of a development, harm to outlook and noise impacts of the development that could impact on a neighbour's living conditions.
- 2.32. The nearest sensitive use is directly to the north at Queen's Court, which is a ten storey building containing student accommodation. The closest residential dwellings are to the west on the other side of the A329, but given the intervening distance and the scale of the proposals, they are not considered to be affected by the proposals.
- 2.33. The proposals would be in close proximity to the southern elevation of Queen's Court, which has numerous windows facing towards the application site. The windows face directly south towards the site on each floor, and serve bedrooms, kitchens, stairwells, corridors and study spaces.
- 2.34. At basement level (below podium level), the proposed building would be sited on the northern boundary of the site, 2m away from Queen's Court. At podium level ('street level'), the proposal between 2m and 4m away from the southern face of Queen's Walk. At first floor level the proposal is almost entirely set off from the boundary, at 4m from the side elevation of Queen's Court. These are close separation distances and as such, the proposals would have an impact on the amenities of the affected rooms in terms of daylight, sunlight and outlook as per Policy CC8.

Daylight

- 2.35. The applicant has submitted a comprehensive daylight and sunlight report which provides an assessment of the impact of the proposed building on the daylight and sunlight levels to the rooms which the windows serve. The report assessed 212 windows that could be affected by the proposals and found that 25 windows would experience a loss of daylight beyond the Building Research Establishment (BRE) guidelines. These affected windows are on the ground and first floor of the building on the southernmost elevation, and serve 20 study/bedrooms, some of which contain kitchen areas, as well as stairwells and corridors. Of the 25 windows which will lose daylight, 6 would experience minor reductions (up to 29% in daylight reduction), which is considered acceptable in planning terms. The other 19 windows would experience more significant reductions in daylight. Both study/bedrooms with and without kitchens are considered to be 'habitable rooms' under the BRE guidance, and so loss of light to these areas is considered to be more harmful than to corridors or stairwells. The below image taken from the submitted report identifies the affected windows:

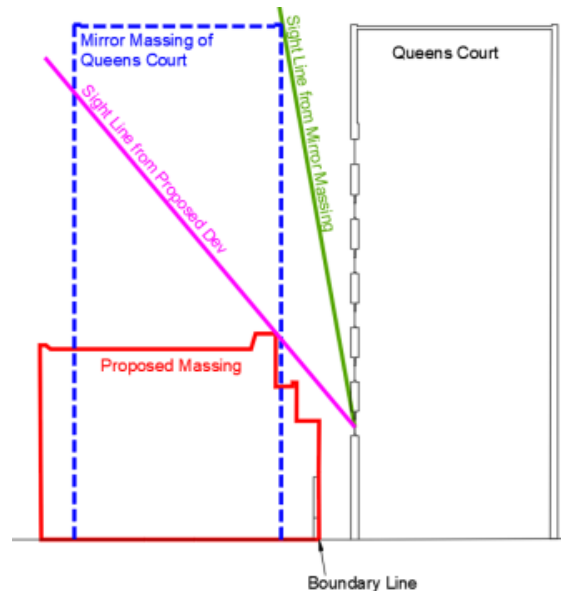


Sunlight

- 2.36. The report also assessed the impact of the proposal on the sunlight received for rooms facing onto the site. Of the 127 rooms assessed which have a window facing towards the application site, 115 rooms would continue to meet the BRE criteria. The remaining 12 rooms which do not meet the criteria would not meet the guidelines due to a reduction in the winter sunlight hours only. These rooms are 2 kitchens within study bedroom units and 10 study/bedrooms and are located on the ground floor only, no communal amenity areas are affected. All rooms would, however, meet the BRE recommended criteria for annual sunlight hours, i.e. when considered across the year, average levels of sunlight would be acceptable when reviewed against the BRE Guidelines, but would be below the relevant threshold during winter. The below image, taken from the submitted report shows the windows which would not meet the guidelines for winter sunlight.



- 2.37. The submitted report identifies that the proposals would cause harm to the living conditions of the residents at Queen's Court through loss of daylight and sunlight. The Queen's Court building was originally constructed as an office building facing directly onto the back of house area of the theatre. The original relationship between the two sites has resulted in a situation where the relationship between the two developments is already very close. Given the proximity of Queen's Court to the boundary of the site, and the position of the proposal on and close to the boundary of the application site, between 2m and 4m away from the south facing windows, the proposal would also result in an overbearing presence and a loss of outlook, particularly to the ground floor (podium level) windows, as well as the impacts on daylight and sunlight as outlined in the previous paragraphs. It is important to note that the proposals would only affect the study/bedrooms, some of which include their own kitchen facilities, and none of the windows serve communal living spaces. Where harm has been established, certain factors can play a part in mitigating that harm. In this case, there are several mitigating factors which should be borne in mind.
- 2.38. The Queen's Court building was converted from office use to student accommodation, and offers either 44 or 51 week tenancies to students. Short stays at the site (minimum 1 week) are also offered and this appears to be out of term time. These arrangements indicate that there is some turnover of tenants within the building, and although there are some short stays, many of the tenants are likely to be there for a year, but may stay longer if tenancies are available. Each student has their own study-bedroom, although there are different arrangements, including some with their own kitchen, and so logic dictates that these occupants are more likely to spend time in their study/bedroom and so are more susceptible to impacts on their light levels. The windows facing onto the application site only serve study-bedrooms and bedrooms with kitchens, as well as several corridor/stairwell windows. There are also numerous other amenity facilities within Queen's Court, including a gym and fitness studio, cinema room, games rooms, dining area and study areas, as well as an external courtyard amenity space. This allows residents other spaces to use other than the study/bedrooms which are most affected by the proposals. Given this, it is clear that whilst the impact on the identified rooms and windows is significant in places, the nature of the use of the building is such that there are other areas which the residents regularly use which have suitable amenity.
- 2.39. Whilst the daylight loss for the 25 windows identified in the report is significant compared to the daylight received currently, another assessment technique in the BRE guidance is the 'Vertical Sky Component' (VSC) values of the windows. This is a measure of the amount of sky visible from a given point (usually taken from the centre of the window), and is expressed as a percentage. All of the 25 windows which are affected by the proposals would retain a VSC of 10% or higher, and the average across these windows would be 15%. It is accepted practice that VSC values over 20% are considered reasonably good, in the mid-teens can be considered acceptable, but below 10%, the availability of direct light from the sky will be poor. Given the VSC values, and the urban location, it is considered that although there is a loss of daylight to the windows, on average, the VSC value demonstrates that in terms of this important measure, the daylight levels nevertheless remain comparatively reasonable for this dense urban location.
- 2.40. The BRE guidelines further establish the 'bad neighbour' principle, recognising that some buildings are inherently bad neighbours and are sited too close to their boundary to expect high levels of daylight. Queen's Court is within 2m of the boundary with the application site and can be considered as a bad neighbour as it constrains the development potential of the application site if the BRE guideline tests for daylight and sunlight are rigidly adhered to, and therefore larger reductions of daylight and sunlight should be expected by this adjacent development. The BRE Guidelines set out a Mirror Massing Assessment, which is used to demonstrate that if a bad neighbour building were replicated on the development site, what the light implications would be for the existing building. The applicants have carried this out, and provided the below image to demonstrate the difference:



- 2.41. The mirror massing of Queen’s Court creates an obstruction angle of 80 degrees, which is equivalent to approximately 3% VSC value. Therefore the alternative target value of 3% would be considered a reasonable VSC value when using this method of assessment. Given the proposals would have a VSC value of 10% as a minimum, this would exceed the 3% suggested by the Mirror Massing Assessment.
- 2.42. Overall, it is accepted that the proposal would cause harm to the living conditions of the neighbouring student accommodation through loss of light, outlook and the creation of an increased overbearing presence in close proximity to the boundary. This harm is mitigated somewhat given the nature of the adjoining use and the provision of a largely acceptable VSC value to many of the windows. Furthermore, the application of the Mirror Massing Assessment demonstrates that Queen’s Court relies on the current open nature of the Hexagon site to “borrow” outlook and light to achieve the light levels as existing. The Mirror Massing Assessment demonstrates that Queen’s Court can be considered a bad neighbour, and it is not reasonable to expect that the light and outlook levels can be retained where development is presented in such situations. Forthcoming development, for example at Broad Street Mall, must be considered in terms of an increase in overshadowing and loss of light, but given no permission exists on that site currently, this should only be given very limited weight. These mitigating factors would not fully overcome the harm that would arise from the introduction of the proposed building, however, officers consider that the impact of the harm is lessened in this instance. Given this, the proposal would fail to adhere to Local Plan Policy CC8 in its entirety, and this harm must be weighed in the planning balance against the benefits of the scheme.

Design Considerations – Layout, Scale, Heritage and Appearance

- 2.43. Policy CC7 (Design and the Public Realm) seeks to ensure that new development enhances and preserves local character. The policy places importance on the layout of the urban structure and urban grain, stipulating that development should respond positively to the local context and create safe and accessible environments. The policy requires, “...high design quality that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area of Reading in which it is located”.
- 2.44. The application relates to one of the landmark buildings in Reading, the Hexagon, which has a distinctive character due to its Brutalist hexagonal form. The current theatre is readily visible from Queens Walk and the podium level, and whilst it presents an attractive façade itself, has become somewhat isolated in recent years, and the experience of the Hexagon from the podium level is not as welcoming and attractive as it could be, particularly given that the main access is accessed via stairs from the podium.

- 2.45. The proposal would replace existing back of house space to the north of the Hexagon building, introducing a larger scale of development on this side of the Hexagon when compared with the current built form. Considering the unique design characteristics of the Hexagon itself, the proposed rectangular form of the new extension would not compete with the architectural form of the main building. The introduction of podium-level access, a glazed frontage, and active uses such as the bar/café and roof terrace will significantly increase the legibility of the cultural offering in this part of Reading. Furthermore, the activation of this part of Queens Walk at podium level would provide an enhanced visitor experience for both the new theatre and the existing Hexagon. The proposed use, access route to Queens Walk, internal and external spaces would complement the Hexagon's original use and would enhance the setting of the Hexagon, particularly when viewed from Queen's Walk.
- 2.46. The proposed extension would reflect important characteristics of the main Hexagon building, without seeking to copy the original building, or become more prominent. The use of a timber structure with concrete decks and steel columns would refer to both the architecture of the Hexagon itself and the wider immediate environment by using complementary materials and an appropriate design style. The repetition of the hexagon shape in the ventilation stack would also ensure that the building reflects the unique architectural style of the existing theatre. The ventilation stack provides an attractive and visible marker which would aid in pathfinding from along Dusseldorf Way and other views across the Minster Quarter Area, signifying the Hexagon cultural quarter.
- 2.47. The extension of the podium to provide access into the new theatre would provide additional high quality public space and an improved entrance to the theatre facilities. Given the existing entrance to the Hexagon is not at the same level as the podium, and requires stepped or ramped access, this would bring significant advantages, and would contribute towards the aims of Local Plan Policy CR12 and the MQDF, especially when combined with the increase in planting at both podium level and roof level with green roofs provided.
- 2.48. Policy EN1 of the Local Plan seeks to protect and enhance the historic environment. Policy EN3 requires development to contribute positively to local character and distinctiveness. Policy EN4 requires development to demonstrate that the development conserves locally important heritage assets.
- 2.49. The site is not within a conservation area, nor is the building listed. However, it can be considered as a non-designated heritage asset given its local significance and the unique nature of its design. The application site is located in between two Conservation Areas, St Mary's Butts/Castle Street to the east and Castle Hill/Russell Street/Oxford Road to the west. There are some Listed Buildings nearby, including the Grade 1 Listed Church of St Mary (the Minster), although these are set some distance from the application site.



- 2.50. Given the distance from designated heritage assets, such as the Grade 1 Listed St Mary's Church and the two Conservation Areas, combined with the high quality of design and appropriate scale within its context, it is considered that the proposal would not result in any harm to the setting or views of the designated heritage assets.
- 2.51. Overall, the proposal would represent a high quality design, which reflects important aspects of its immediate surroundings, in particular the Hexagon itself, and would provide significant improvements to the public realm at Queen's Walk. The scale is acceptable in townscape terms, and would be appropriate in its position adjacent to the Hexagon. The proposal is therefore considered to comply with relevant design policies, and would be acceptable in this regard.

Highways and Transport

- 2.52. Policies TR3 (Access, Traffic and Highway related matters), TR1 (Achieving the Transport Strategy) and TR5 (Car and Cycle Parking and Electric Vehicle Charging) of the Local Plan seek to ensure that development has an appropriate relationship with the transport network, and encourage the use of public transport, walking and cycling.
- 2.53. The site is within the Reading Central Area, and is well served by rail and bus links, as well as having a large number of public car parking spaces nearby (within the Broad Street Mall car park). There are extensive on-street car parking restrictions in the area which prevent on-street parking. The proposal would result in a reduction in car parking spaces, from 18 to 12 due to the space needed to create the podium level pedestrian link. The 12 spaces would be provided in the same area as the existing spaces, and the 8 disabled persons' spaces would be retained. No visitor parking, other than accessible parking, would be provided. Given the location of the site in an area with great public transport links, and the proximity to public car parks, this level of provision is considered to be acceptable.
- 2.54. New cycle parking would be provided for staff in an internal cycle store at basement level, along with end of trip facilities such as a shower. This is an improvement on the existing situation, as there are currently no cycle parking spaces on site.
- 2.55. The proposals could accommodate 244 seated attendees, or 321 standing, alongside the existing provision at the Hexagon. The number of staff on site is expected to be unchanged as a result of the development proposals. The applicant has undertaken travel surveys which demonstrate that 55% of visitors travel to the Hexagon by car, with 45% travelling by sustainable modes of transport. Therefore, in a worst case scenario (321 attendees), the new space may generate approximately 178 additional trips to the site. Whilst this represents an increase on the existing trip generation, it is unlikely to result in a material impact on traffic flows on the surrounding highway network, or the public transport system.
- 2.56. The proposal would provide a new podium-level pedestrian link connecting Queen's Walk to the new extension, which would provide improved access into the Hexagon at an appropriate location. This represents a significant benefit in terms of accessibility into both theatres.
- 2.57. The proposals would reconfigure the existing Hexagon loading area, moving the loading area from the eastern side to the western side to create a unified loading area for back of house operations accessed from the A329 IDR. This results in the removal of the need to park lorries and other large vehicles at the front of the Hexagon, minimising interaction with coach drop offs, staff parking and disabled parking, which is a benefit. Swept paths have been submitted to demonstrate that two HGVs can be accommodated on site simultaneously. Deliveries are not expected to increase, and the proposed extension would use the same waste and recycling storage and collection arrangements as the existing building, which is considered to be acceptable.
- 2.58. The provision of a new theatre with associated other uses is in a highly accessible location, with multiple methods of transport viable for access to the site. It would improve the existing servicing and access arrangements at the Hexagon, and would introduce

cycle parking and facilities for staff to the site. Furthermore, it would provide an adequate level of car parking. The proposal would result in any unacceptable impact on the highway network, and is considered acceptable in this regard.

Natural Environment and Ecology

- 2.59. Policy EN14 (Trees, Hedges and Woodland) seeks to extend the Borough's vegetation cover and that development should make provision for tree planting whilst Policy CC7 (Design and the Public Realm) seeks proposal should include appropriate landscaping. Proposals should demonstrate an appropriate level of greening and/or net gain in the tree number.
- 2.60. The site is within Abbey ward, which has the lowest tree canopy cover in the Borough, and is within the Air Quality Management Area. The site is a very urban present location, with significant levels of hard surfacing and limited opportunities for planting given the nature of the podium and level differences. The need for additional tree planting is therefore of significant importance. Furthermore, given the importance of the site in its position within the Minster Quarter area, proposals should ensure that high quality hard and soft landscaping is provided.
- 2.61. Significant planting and landscaping will be difficult to achieve because of the constrained nature of the site, changes in levels between the basement and podium and the urban nature of the immediate area. The proposals would introduce hard landscaping to the front of the building to allow for the new link to the podium, alongside planters with trees on the Queens Walk frontage. The proposal would also include green roofs and a number of biodiversity enhancements. The proposals have provided an appropriate level of soft landscaping, considering the restrictions on the site, which would fit into the wider aspirations for the area, and would introduce green roofs and planters with trees to an area with very little existing greenery. The hard landscaping linking Queens Walk with the theatre would ensure a high quality finish, and would represent a significant improvement on the existing arrangements.
- 2.62. Policy EN12 (Biodiversity and the Green Network) seeks that development should not result in a net loss of biodiversity and should provide for a net gain of biodiversity wherever possible by protecting, enhancing and incorporating features of biodiversity on and adjacent to development sites and by providing new tree planting and wildlife friendly landscaping and ecological enhancements wherever practicable.
- 2.63. The applicant has demonstrated that the site does not currently accommodate for protected species, but there are likely to be some areas of the site which are used for nesting birds, with some offsite trees nearby (within the Minster Quarter site) having potential for roosting bats. The applicant has recommended some precautionary measures which would ensure that the works would not affect protected species, which would be secured by condition.
- 2.64. The applicant has provided a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) assessment, which demonstrates that the proposal would result in a net gain of 0.16 biodiversity units, equating to an increase of 12.82%. This is achieved through the creation of two green roofs, which would be secured by condition.
- 2.65. The proposals would provide adequate levels of hard and soft landscaping and ecology enhancements, which would comply with Local Plan Policies EN12 and EN14.

Environmental Protection Matters (Air Quality, Noise, SUDS & Contamination)

- 2.66. Policy EN15 (Air Quality) requires development to have regard to the need to improve air quality and reduce the effects of poor air quality, especially within the Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). Policy EN17 (Noise Generating Equipment) requires development to ensure noise arising from equipment does not result in harm. Policy CC8 requires development to ensure that noise arising from the use or operation does not have any negative impact on neighbouring residents. Policy EN18 (Flooding and Sustainable Drainage Systems) requires Major development to incorporate SuDS. Policy EN16 (Pollution and Water Resources) required that developments on land

affected by contamination can be satisfactorily managed or remediated against so that it is suitable for the proposed use. Past uses of the application indicate that contamination may be present/possible.

- 2.67. The site is within the AQMA, and therefore must consider appropriate mitigation measures where a potential increase in pollutants exists. The applicant has demonstrated that the proposal would have a negligible impact on air quality due to the nature of the use and mitigation measures proposed. The applicants are encouraging the use of sustainable modes of transport through the provision of cycle facilities on site, a reduction in car parking on site and would seek the BREEAM Excellent accreditation. It is considered that the proposals are sufficient to ensure that there would not be a negative impact on air quality, and mitigation measures would be secured by condition.
- 2.68. The proposals would result in an increase in activity (ie. noise disturbance) at the site. The nearest noise receptor would be at Queen's Court. A noise assessment has been submitted as part of the application, which demonstrates that there would be no significant impact on the neighbouring building, however, further information regarding mechanical plant noise and noise insulation would be secured by condition. A Construction Method Statement will be secured by condition to ensure that the construction process would be managed appropriately to ensure minimal impact on neighbouring uses.
- 2.69. The applicant has submitted a desk top study which identifies that there is likely to be a low risk of contaminated land at the site, but recommends an investigation to confirm. This would be secured by condition.
- 2.70. The building would have glazing facing onto Queens Walk, which would result in some lightspill in an easterly direction. The flank wall facing Queen's Court does not contain glazing, and is unlikely to result in significant lightspill, ensuring that there would be no harm to the neighbouring student accommodation. A condition is recommended to provide additional information relating to light levels at the site to ensure that lightspill from inside the building would not impact on neighbouring residents.
- 2.71. Further conditions securing a Construction Method Statement, hours of construction and preventing bonfires on site have been recommended to ensure that disruption during the construction process would be minimal.
- 2.72. The applicant has presented a Sustainable Drainage Strategy which would be satisfactory and would be secured by condition.

Sustainability

- 2.73. Policy CC2 (Sustainable Design and Construction) seeks major non-residential to meet BREEAM excellent standards where possible.
- 2.74. The proposals seek to achieve BREEAM Excellent standards, which is compliant with policy, and would bring forward a sustainable scheme. The proposal would utilise Air Source Heat Pumps and solar panels at roof level to achieve this. The construction process would also use sustainable materials. Conditions are recommended to secure this.

Legal Agreement

- 2.75. The overarching infrastructure Policy CC9 (Securing Infrastructure) allows for necessary contributions to be secured to ensure that the impacts of a scheme are properly mitigated. The following obligations would be sought and as set out in the recommendation above.
- 2.76. Employment and Skills Plan (ESP) for the Construction phases of the development. This is required in line with Policy CC9 (Securing Infrastructure) and the Employment, Skills and Training SPD. It is not yet known whether this will take the form of an actual ESP to be progressed by them on site, or payment of an equivalent financial contribution, as

per the SPD formula. The legal agreement will be worded flexibly to enable either eventuality.

- To secure a construction phase Employment Skills and Training Plan or equivalent financial contribution (**£4,330**).

8. Equality implications

2.77. Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

2.78. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, sex, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation. It is considered that there is no indication or evidence that the protected groups have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular application. Furthermore, the proposal would be a positive addition to Reading in terms of its use and the complementary nature of the uses and significant improvement in terms of access for all into both the existing Hexagon and the new theatre.

9. Conclusion and Planning Balance

2.79. As with all applications considered by the Local Planning Authority, the application is required to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise, as per Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

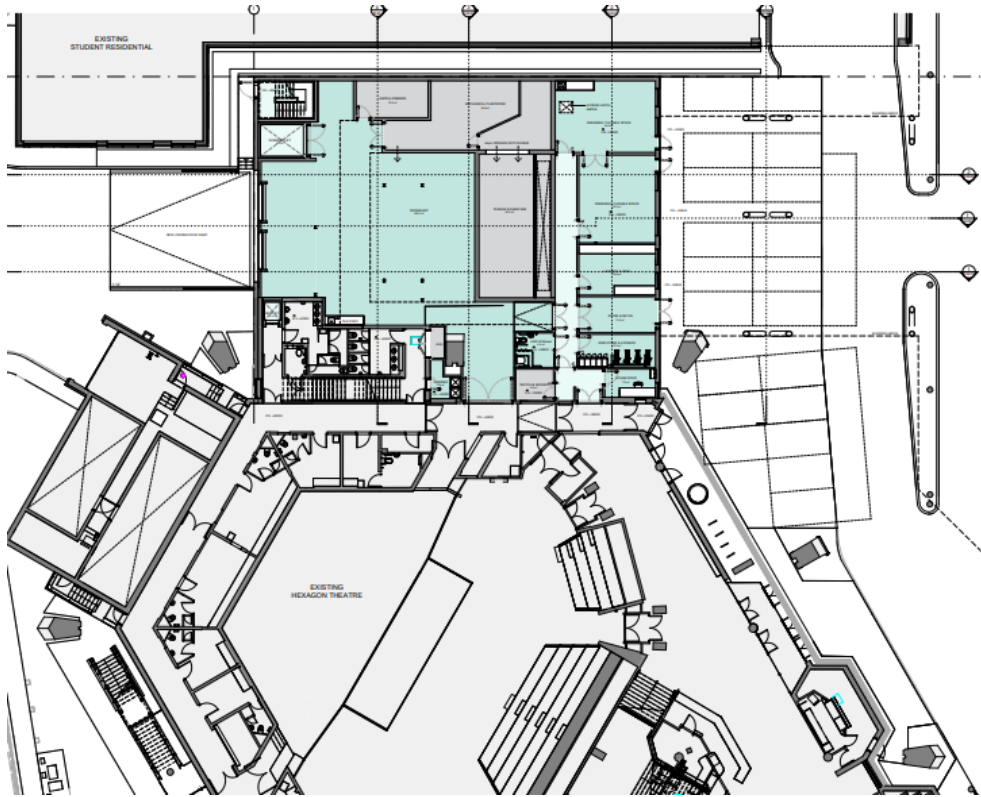
2.80. The proposals would result in significant benefits, including the provision of a new theatre within the town centre, alongside community space which can be used in conjunction with the rehearsal space and other facilities at the site. The proposals would also provide improvements to the existing theatre facility at the Hexagon, through greatly improved back of house space, a reorganised delivery and servicing provision and the provision of cycle parking for staff. These improvements to the arts and culture offer within Reading Town Centre carry great weight in considering the proposal. Furthermore, the proposals bring significant public realm improvements in a key location within an allocated Opportunity Area, and would introduce a building of high quality design in a key cultural quarter of Reading. The high quality design and public realm improvements carry significant weight when assessing the application.

2.81. The proposals would cause harm to the living conditions for some occupiers of the neighbouring student accommodation at Queen's Court to the north, through a loss of light and outlook, as well as the creation of an overbearing presence. However, the severity of this harm is considered to partly due to the orientation, proximity and siting/history of the adjacent building, which was designed as an office block and largely relies for its outlook and daylight over the adjacent site (the application site). This situation is not considered to prevent development given the significant benefits of the scheme.

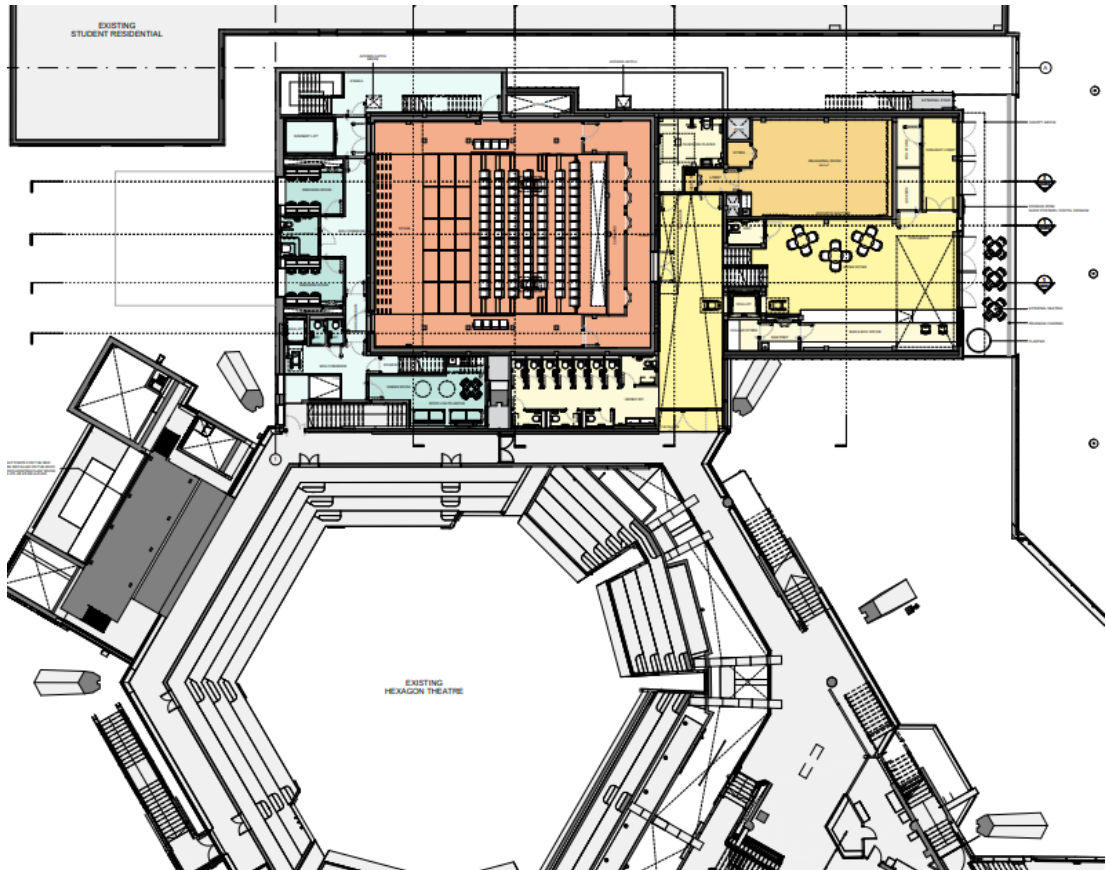
2.82. On balance, the benefits that the proposals would bring to Reading outweigh the limited instance of harm caused by the proposal. The significance of a new cultural facility in this part of the town, alongside the benefits to the existing Hexagon theatre, as well as the public realm and design quality would be so great that they would overcome the harm caused to living conditions at the neighbouring site.

2.83. Given this, the application is recommended to be approved, subject to relevant planning conditions and legal agreement.

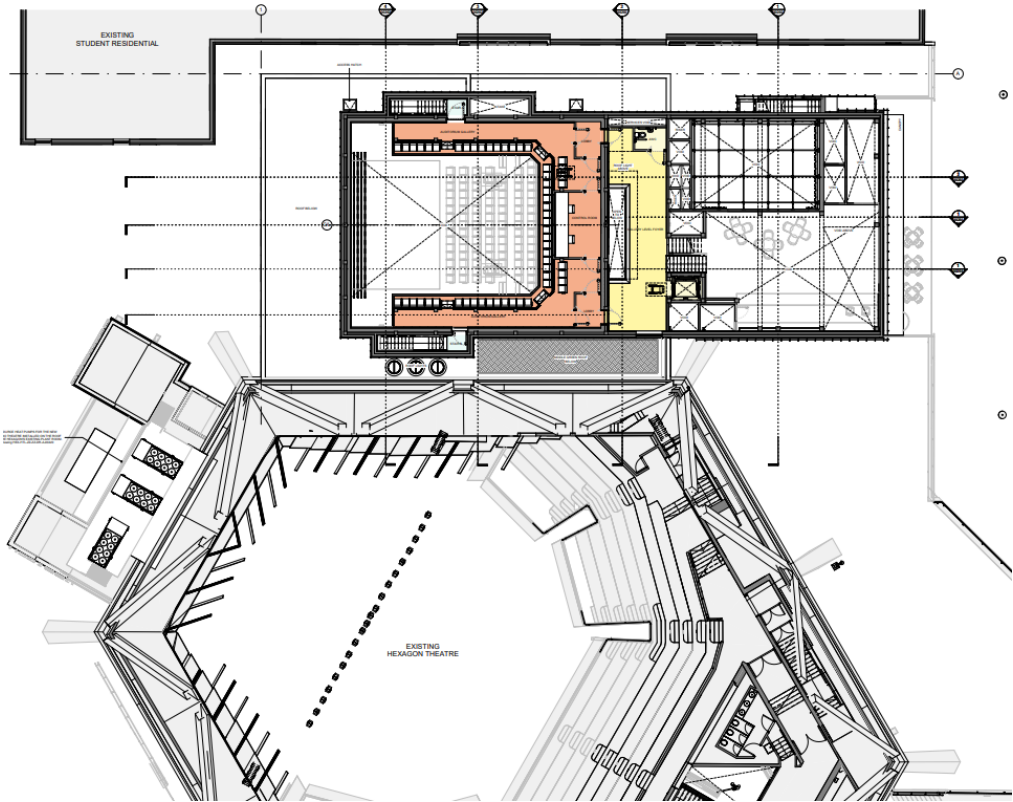
Basement Plan (below podium level)



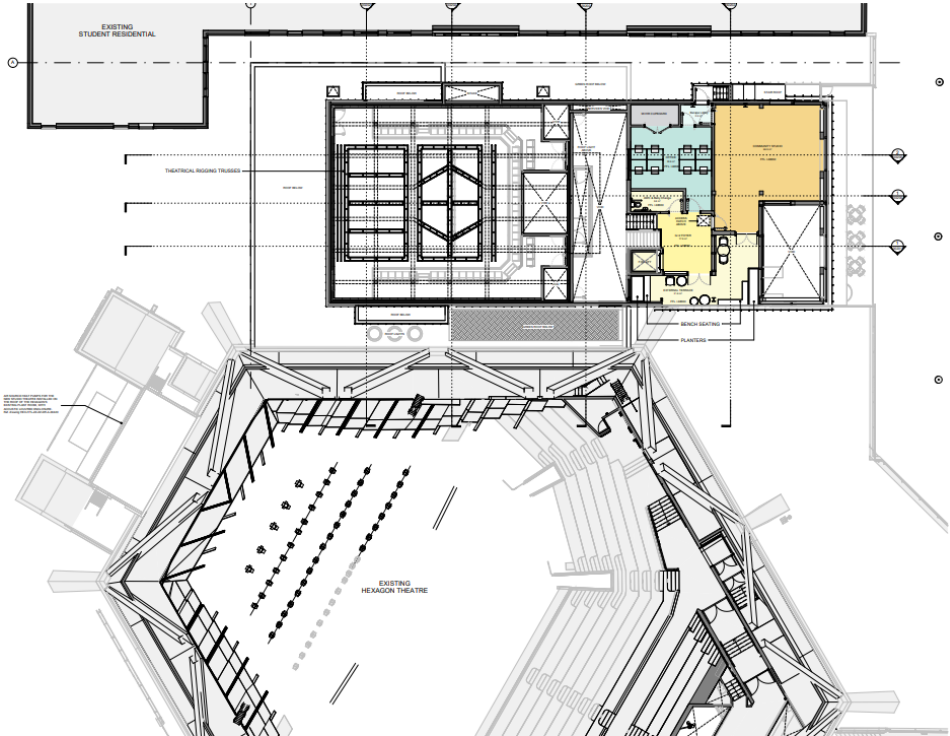
Ground Floor Plan (Podium level)



Mezzanine Level



First floor level (above podium)



Site Sections

