

## Plaza Super Cinema and Variety Theatre, Stockport

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### Short description of the project

The Stockport Plaza is an Art Deco super cinema constructed in 1932. After 33 years of use as a bingo hall, Mecca bingo moved out in 1998 and the building was standing empty with an uncertain future. The Plaza Action Group was formed to campaign for the acquisition of the building and its reopening as a cinema and theatre. Stockport Borough Council pledged £550,000 to help purchase the building and the Stockport Plaza Trust was set up as a registered charity and company limited by guarantee to run the building with a mission statement to preserve, protect and restore the Plaza for community, local and national use.



Stockport Plaza front elevation at night © Stockport Plaza Trust

The project was community-led with a large team of volunteers providing electrical, mechanical, plumbing, carpentry, plastering and painting skills. Volunteers without specific skills received training and were able to contribute to projects such as seat painting and upholstery.

The venue opened in December 2000 as a receiving house for touring shows and one-night productions, a performance venue for local dramatic and amateur operatic groups and as a cinema showing classic and contemporary films.

The Board consists of seven Trustees with expertise in law, engineering, finance, business and stage management, supported by an active “Friends” organisation that

are pivotal in fundraising, profiling, and providing labour to operate and maintain the venue on a daily basis. A General Manager was appointed to run the venue and provide industry expertise.

In 2007 the Plaza received a £2million grant from the HLF backed up by £3.3million matched funding from development organisations and private donations to undertake a full restoration of the building to its original decorative style of 1932. This was carried out in 2010 and the building continues to operate as a successful cinema and performance venue.

### **What would have happened without this project?**

Without the efforts of this group, the Plaza could well have stood empty and struggled to find a viable alternative use once Mecca bingo had vacated it. The cinema was given the protection of a Grade II listing in 1997 (upgraded to II\* in 2000) but without swift intervention the building's fabric would have deteriorated severely as it required urgent maintenance to the roof to prevent damaging water ingress.

This scheme has resulted in the only 'super cinema' from the great age of cinema building to be totally restored to its original appearance and finding a use sympathetic to the building. It enables the building to be regularly used and enjoyed by a larger and wider section of the community than might otherwise have been possible and has ensured that it has not only survived but thrived.

### **What has the project achieved, or difference has it made?**

The rebirth of the Plaza has had a revitalising effect upon the local community and district. Over 150 volunteers gave thousands of in-kind hours in the seven months prior to re-opening to enable the building to be converted back from bingo use to cinema and stage use and the Friends organisation consists of over 1,400 members giving daily support to the functioning of the building. Volunteers have learned new skills and significantly contributed to a valuable community resource. This was recognised when the Plaza received the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2004.

The venue is open around 275 days a year with around 65% theatre and amateur dramatic groups' shows and 35% film screenings. The revitalisation of the first floor café restaurant which is open 6 days a week has provided a welcome focus for visitors to the adjacent shopping centre which has limited refreshment facilities. It also provides an important additional revenue stream for the venue.

Core to the restoration ethos was the use of local businesses to undertake the work wherever possible; for example, the plasterwork repair and restoration was carried out by Ornate Interiors of Pudsey, a company which had connections going back to the Art Plaster Co. of Salford which had been responsible for the original plasterwork in 1932. The restoration therefore helped to support local businesses and craftsmen and support the continuation of specialist trades.



Interior of Stockport Plaza © Stockport Plaza Trust

### What were the main lessons learnt or challenges overcome?

The Trust originally submitted an application to the HLF in 2001, shortly after acquiring the building, for funds to complete the restoration of the building straightaway. However, the application was withdrawn on the advice of HLF as it was felt that the organisation was still immature and needed to prove itself. The venue was therefore managed and operated successfully for seven years and able to demonstrate revenue achievement to budget over the operating period before another (successful) application was made to the HLF for funds to complete the restoration.

Although it meant that they had to operate with elements of the building not functioning as fully as might be desired, the delay enabled the organisation to develop their plans fully, learn about how the building worked and demonstrate an ability to manage and develop the business independently of any grant aid.

### What is the future of the project?

Following the extensive restoration project, the Plaza re-opened in December 2009 and has continued to operate successfully. It was recently awarded a grant by the Stockport Portas Pilot to go towards the cost of installing digital projection equipment to sit alongside the traditional 35mm projectors and enable the venue to expand the range of what it can offer audiences including screening live theatre and opera performances.

Plans for the future include filling in several final details of the restoration with the support of local volunteers and professional teams. Projects include the manufacture of a replica electrolier for the main ceiling dome and the replacement of all the seats (which had been acquired piecemeal from several sources) with replicas of the 1932 seats to complete the authentic look of the auditorium. In addition, the stepping of the circle has been altered at various times over the years and it is planned to return it to the original 1932 configuration to improve the sightlines and audience comfort in this area.

The Plaza is recognised as a flagship project which has successfully delivered the first full-scale restoration of a classic cine-variety theatre from the most important period of cinema construction. It has been the recipient of several prestigious conservation awards including winning the RICS North-West Building Conservation Award in 2011 and being crowned Project of the Year.

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