



Registered with the Scottish Civic Trust  
Registered Charity Number [REDACTED]  
Honorary Secretary: Mr A Struthers

Aberdeen Civic Society  
c/o 44 North Deeside Road,  
ABERDEEN  
AB15 7PL

Tel [REDACTED]

Enterprise, Planning & Infrastructure  
Aberdeen City Council  
Business Hub 4  
Ground Floor North  
Marischal College  
Broad Street  
Aberdeen  
AB10 1AB

17 June 2013

Dear Dr Bochel

**[REDACTED] & 130616 -- 431 Union Street (Former Capitol)**

The Society has considered the above application and wishes to comment as follows:-

*The Society is welcomes this application and is very pleased that work is being carried out to retain, clean and restore the former Capitol frontage and foyer. We also welcome the addition of extra high quality office space in the town centre, especially at the West End of Union Street. That said, however, we do have reservations about the height of the building and the current detailing as displayed to us on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> June. We understand that further work is being undertaken to enhance the detailing of the building and we look forward to seeing these revisions.*

We would be grateful if our representation could be given consideration.

Yours sincerely

Alastair Struthers

Aberdeen City Council  
PLANNING DEPT  
CITY COUNCIL  
BROAD ST  
ABERDEEN

CYLLINDARROCH  
14 ROY FOLD CRESCENT  
ABERDEEN AB15 6BT  
31st MAY 2013

CAPITEL THEATRE  
TOTAL OBJECTION TO YET ANOTHER  
St Nicholas House

Dear Sir

Are we really going to yet have  
a repeat of the former Council Offices  
in Broad St / in Union St.  
Any new Office in Union St should  
be no higher than the present one  
of Brown Millar & the neighbouring Clubs.  
As it would be quite wrong to permit  
this plan of another Warehouse of Office  
flats so high in Union St.

Yours Sincerely  
AM 15/5/13

Neighbourhood Council Co-ordinator  
for Royfold Crescent & Anderson Drive

CAPITOL CINEMA, PROPOSED  
OFFICE BUILDING.

130216

4, FORNIE CRESCENT  
BRIDGE OF DON,  
ABERDEEN AB22 8TG

TEL [REDACTED]

13-06-13

DEAR SIR OR MADAM,

MORE OFFICE BUILDINGS IN THE CITY CENTRE?  
WHEN I READ OF COMPANIES RELOCATING TO NEW BUSINESS PARKS  
FROM THE CITY CENTRE TO THE OBT-SKIRTS, DYCE, WESTHILL, KINGSWELLS  
CONCERN IMPACT OF TOWER BLOCK ON UNION STREET'S GRANITE MILE  
SKYLINE, TALL BUILDINGS DWARF HISTORIC BUILDINGS.

LOOK OF DEVELOPERS WANT TO ENSURE CAPITOL CINEMA'S 1933  
COMPTON ORGAN IS RESTORED, MAINTAINED IN WORKING ORDER WITH  
ORGAN CONCERTS TO LET THE YOUNGER GENERATION ENJOY THE  
CINEMA ORGAN MUSIC. (CHECK OUT RADIO TWO REGULAR ORGAN  
PROGRAMME "THE ORGANIST ENTERTAINS" EVERY TUESDAY EVENING AT  
9.30 P.M.)

THE CAPITOL NAME SHOULD APPEAR ON SILVER CANOPY, RETAIN EXTERIOR  
STILL, POSTER FRAMES SHOWCASE ABERDEEN'S RICH CINEMA HISTORY,  
THUS IMPROVING THE FRONTAGE IMAGE.

THE ART DECO FORMER CIRCLE AREA, FORMER OSCAR'S BARR RESTAURANT,  
NOT BEYOND DEVELOPERS VISION TO ENHANCE THIS AREA WITH A  
CINEMA THEMED CAFE BAR RATHER THAN AN EMPTY SPACE AS PLANNED

THE DEMOLITION OF REAR AREA (WHAT BECOMES OF CINEMA CLOCKS,  
SCREEN ENDING) FOR A CAR PARK, WILL ONLY ADD TO MORE TRAFFIC  
CONGESTION IN THE CITY CENTRE AT ODDS WITH ENCOURAGING USE OF  
PASSENGER TRANSPORT, MORE CARS WILL ONLY SHRINK BUS SERVICES  
WHICH SADLY IS ONGOING.

RECENTLY BACK FROM HOLIDAY IN POLAND WHERE CITIES OLD TOWN  
AREAS ARE LOYALLY CARED FOR, IMPRESSIVE ARCHITECTURE RETAINED,  
NO TOWER BLOCKS OBSTRUCTING THE SKYLINE, NEW SHOPPING MALLS  
WITH VERY IMPRESSIVE INTERIOR DESIGN, THE PAST COMPLEMENTING  
THE MODERN AREA. SURELY ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL CAN HAVE A BETTER  
VISION FOR HISTORIC UNION STREET THAN MORE BLAND SOLELESS  
ARCHITECTURE FRONTAGES.

MEMO NOW AGED 67, WORKED WITH PARENTS IN TIVOLI THEATRE  
PROJECTIONIST EX ABC CINEMA (COMPANY FAMED FOR SHOWMANSHIP 60's)  
PLAYHOUSE CINEMA, THIRTY EIGHT YEAR PERIOD AS BUS DRIVER VIEWING  
UNION STREET IN ALL SEASONS (CAPITOL FRONTAGE IMPRESSIVE IN ITS  
HEYDAY). I HAVE THEATRE, CINEMA AND ARCHITECTURE INTEREST AND  
THINK MORE EFFORT SHOULD BE DONE TO ENSURE CAPITOL HERITAGE IS  
RETAINED SO THAT IT CONSISTENTLY ALONGSIDE THE ART CULTURE  
GENIUS OF MUSIC HALL, HIS MAJESTY'S AND TIVOLI THEATRES, LEMON  
TREE AND ART GALLERY.

YOURS FAITHFULLY,  
[REDACTED]

Robert Vickers

---

**From:** Lucy Greene  
**Sent:** 21 June 2013 14:43  
**To:** Pi  
**Subject:** FW: The Capitol and St Nicks II  
**Attachments:** Capitol Development.doc; Last Act for Capitol Cinema Aberdeen Voice Article.doc; Aberdeen Musicians in bid to Save Historic Organ (proofread).doc

Hi  
Please Could this email and three attachments be registered as valid representations to both applications 130615 and 130616  
Thanks very much  
Lucy

---

**From:** Murray Henderson  
**Sent:** 21 June 2013 12:27  
**To:** Lucy Greene  
**Subject:** RE: The Capitol and St Nicks II

Lucy,

Here is my supplementary letter and the two articles I wrote which I would like to submit as representations on both planning applications as discussed. Please can you confirm that you have accepted them?

I noticed the deadline for one was the 19th of June and the other was today, the 21st. I hope this is not an problem, I thought both deadlines were the same... the 21st.

Thanks.

Murray Henderson

Dear Ms Greene,

I am a resident of Ferryhill and have concerns about the Capitol development (Planning applications P130616 and P130615). I have previously been in contact with you and I thought I would submit a formal representation before the deadline which is the 21st of June 2013.

I have three points to make about the development.

**1. The size of the development.**

It is a 10 story glass tower and its massing is out of proportion with the rest of the buildings on Union Street. The excuse will invariably be that it is in proportion with the Park Inn development behind it, but that building is enormous and dominates everything around it. These types of developments are very unpopular especially in the historic centre of Aberdeen. Is there a historic city centre in the world that has been enhanced by a modern glass tower? It seems lacking in foresight that the council are allowing buildings like this and other large tower developments while at the same time demolishing St Nicholas house because it is an eyesore. This and other towers being built in Aberdeen at the moment are completely out of place with the rest of the Granite City and will be the eye sores of the (very near) future.

The developer will claim he is preserving the historical interior of the building but the public won't see this because it will be a private building fronted by a security guard controlling the access of people to the building. The loss of public access from Union Street makes this a far poorer application than previous ones, as far as the public are concerned.

**2. The loss of the Compton organ.**

The organ is one of only 2 left in Scotland, and this development could see it lost forever. It can be easily saved and put into a reasonably small space. There are also people with the means and the will to save it. Previous work to convert the cinema into a nightclub was granted on the condition that the organ (which I interpret to be the entire instrument, everything it needs to make a sound: console, pipes, percussion, relays, blowers etc) was

retained. Previous council documentation states that the organ forms part of the building's listing. Now the developers are saying in their application that the pipes have been destroyed. But when and by whom? There seems to be confusion on what the organ consists of. The organ is more than just the console with the keys and stops. A survey is required to ascertain what is left of the instrument and its condition. We need to know if part of the organ, apparently a listed feature of the building, has been destroyed without permission. At the very least a condition should be placed that the developer must account for all parts of the organ to ensure more of this historic musical instrument is not lost.

### **3. A lack of proper public consultation.**

The developer has used letters and minutes from a consultation meeting from a previous application, for a different building. The council should not allow this as a valid consultation. At a previous community meeting which I attended, there were strong feelings that the building would be too big and dominate the Aberdeen skyline. The developer has whitewashed the feelings of the community. This application should not proceed further until a proper public consultation has been carried out. If the council allow this as a public consultation despite it being pointed out to them that it took place for a previous application I will consider making a formal complaint to the council.

### **4. It is a speculative development.**

Because the development is speculative, should the owners be unable to find a buyer for the building it will lie empty, just as the round office building at Bridge of Don has. We should not allow developers to be build enormous speculative developments in the city centre.

### **5. Regeneration Potential being Overplayed.**

Claims that this office development will in some way regenerate Union Street are being grossly overstated. I work in the older New Telecom's house and my colleagues and I are not rushing to Union Street at lunchtime to buy Hugo Boss suits. Sandwich shops may do well, but people will arrive to work in their cars and leave in the evenings. This

development will be nothing but increase traffic congestion in the city centre and this building would be better outside the city centre. Sadly it seems that this is council policy. If the council are serious about regenerating Union Street they could start by reducing the astronomical parking charges which blight businesses in the city centre and drive people to Union Square.

I attach two articles that I wrote about the capitol in the hope that they might ignite some passion in the building and the organ itself.

Please keep me informed about the development of this application. I'll keep my fingers crossed that it is rejected. We could do a lot better than this.

Thanks,

Murray Henderson  
Ferryhill, Aberdeen

## **Aberdeen musicians in bid to save historic organ.**

*As plans progress for a new 10 storey office block on the former Capitol cinema, Murray Henderson meets Charlie Davidson, an early member of the Aberdeen Theatre Organ Trust, who talks about his hopes for the legendary Compton Cinema Organ, still resident in the now derelict building.*

During the Capitol's spell as a nightclub, few clubbers could have known that beneath their feet lay an exquisite example of one of the most complex and beautiful musical instruments ever produced in Britain.

The mighty Compton Organ was sealed underneath the floor of the nightclub as a condition of planning approval to convert the cinema in 2002.

It was built by master organ maker John Compton of Nottingham. His brand was the most popular in Britain, with a total of 261 organs installed in British theatres<sup>1</sup>.

Because of the silent nature of early cinema, it was left to virtuoso organists to provide the spine-tingling soundtracks to the era's films. In its heyday the Capitol's Compton was of some renown and organ performances in the theatre were even broadcast to the nation.

A previous planning application for the demolition of the Capitol auditorium was approved by Aberdeen Council and backed by Historic Scotland. Though the plans were not progressed, they included the display of the organ console alone, to be rendered unplayable, above the entrance as "a reminder of the original use of the building"<sup>2</sup>.

But that is not enough for former Trust member and Aberdeen-born organ maestro Charlie Davidson, who is intent on saving the entire instrument from the wrecking ball and ensuring that its unique sound can once again be heard in the city.

**Aberdeen Voice (AV):** Charlie, what is your association with the Capitol's Compton Organ?

**Charlie Davidson (CD):** I was born and raised in Aberdeen, and studied organ at St Andrews Cathedral in King Street Aberdeen in the 1960s but also discovered there was a magical Pipe Organ in the Capitol at the same time. I was allowed in to play the Compton on Saturday mornings which was wonderful. This was about 1965 and the Compton in the Capitol was the first Cinema Pipe Organ I ever played. The Capitol Organ, and in fact the entire cinema, was a big part of my life.

**AV:** Can you describe the Compton and how it felt to play in the Capitol?

**CD:** The Compton was a wonderful instrument. The acoustics of the Capitol were great and the organ console was on an electric lift situated in the centre of the orchestra pit. It was a great thrill to push the 'up' button on the organ console whilst playing and you would be lifted up to stage level in full view of the audience.

**AV:** How does a Cinema Organ differ from a Church Organ, which people might be more familiar with?

**CD:** The mechanical side of the organ is very similar to some Church Organs but the stops, or ranks of pipes, are quite different. Because the Cinema Organ was originally designed to accompany silent films, its main purpose was to imitate an orchestra. Having said that, it can still sound like a Church Organ if required.



The technique required is quite different to Church Organ playing. In fact, you will find that practically all cinema organists can play the Church Organ, but few church organists can play the Cinema Organ. The percussions were a major part of this design. The Capitol Organ has a xylophone, glockenspiel, cathedral chimes, vibraphone and a full set of drums, cymbals and sound effects. The effects are operated by buttons above the pedals and consist of things like horses' hooves, bells, buzzers, car horns, sirens, etc. - all great fun.

**AV:** It sounds like a very complex instrument.

**CD:** The organ is not just the console in the pit; it also has a massive blower in the basement and two rooms full of organ pipes and percussion instruments half way up the proscenium arch on the right hand side. There are also miles and miles of cables and relays etc. Restoration is a big job and I should know as I have removed several of these instruments over the years. The last one was in Mallorca this year.

**AV:** Can you tell us more about your previous restoration work?

**CD:** Another of the organs I rescued was from the Rex Cinema in Stratford, east London. This organ has now been fully restored by a team of enthusiasts in the Royalty Theatre in Bowness on Windermere and had its opening on the 6th October<sup>3</sup>. In addition, I have the unique Ingram Organ from the Astoria Corstorphine in storage and also a fine Wurlitzer Pipe Organ from the Ritz Workington.

**AV:** I understand the Capitol Compton was broadcast.

**CD:** Yes, the Capitol organ was broadcast many times on the BBC. We had lots of famous resident organists including Rowland Timms, George Blackmore, Bobby Pagan and others - all of whom broadcast regularly. The Capitol was very well known to the UK BBC audience.

**AV:** There seem to be a number of different Compton designs, do you know if the Capitol's Compton was unique, designed especially for the cinema?

**CD:** There were many designs of organ console. The Capitol console was unusual but not unique. The art deco end boxes are known as 'coffin ends' for obvious reasons and are really just for show, to make the organ look more impressive as it rose out of the pit in the spotlight.

**AV:** Do you have any idea of how rare these instruments are nowadays?

**CD:** There are now only four Cinema Pipe Organs left in Scotland - the Capitol Compton, a very fine restored Wurlitzer in Glasgow, a Hilsdon organ in Greenlaw (ex Playhouse Edinburgh) and a Compton under restoration in the Heritage Centre Coatbridge. To the best of my knowledge, these are the only Cinema Pipe Organs left in all of Scotland. The Capitol Organ was a particularly good instrument as was the one in the Astoria Aberdeen.

**AV:** What became of the Aberdeen Astoria Organ?

**CD:** It was rescued and installed in the hall of Powis Academy. In November 1982, an arson attack by a pupil destroyed parts of the school including the organ. It had a glass surround and organ bench and the organist could change the colour of the entire lighted console at the flick of a stop. It could also be set to 'auto' and gently fade through all the colours of the rainbow. These illuminated consoles were known as 'jelly moulds' again for obvious reasons.

They were unique to the UK which I always found surprising. The American Cinema Organs never had anything like it.

**AV:** How did you learn the skills necessary to restore Cinema Organs?

**CD:** Sheer trial and error. I bought my first pipe organ from Letterfourie House in Buckle when I was 14 years old and completely rebuilt it. It was a really historic organ and is still going strong with a local organ builder. It just went on from there and I got interested in the mechanics of Pipe Organs. The restoration encompasses woodwork, electrical, relays, etc. which I love and you end up with something you can play.

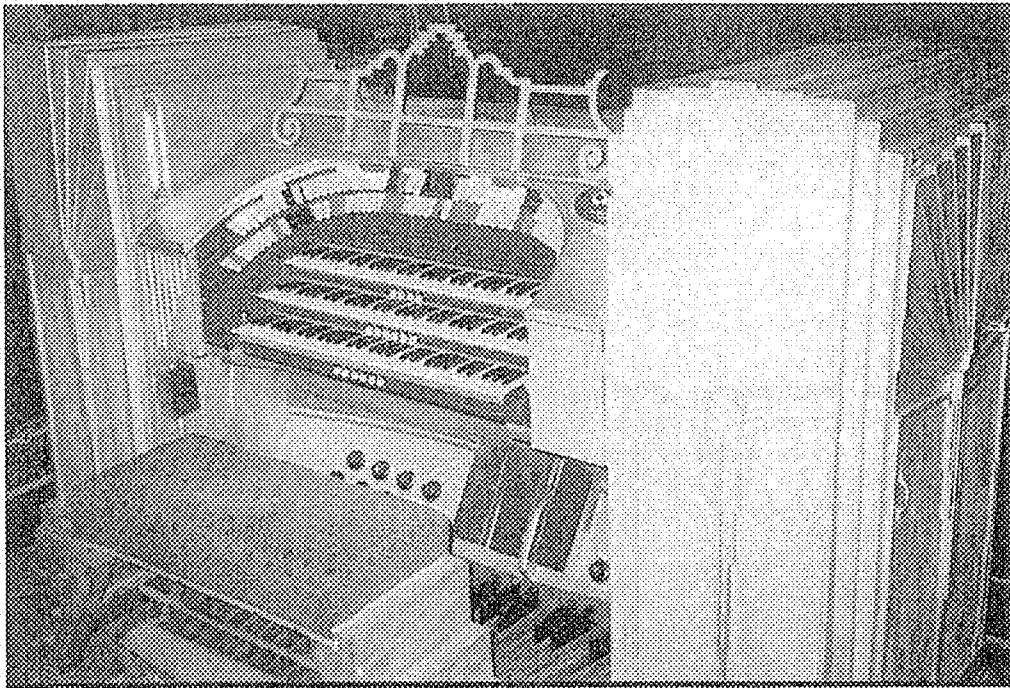
**AV:** In your opinion is the Compton Organ in the Capitol restorable?

**CD:** The Capitol Compton organ is most certainly restorable. It will require a lot of work, but it is such an important piece of Aberdeen's history it really has to be done.

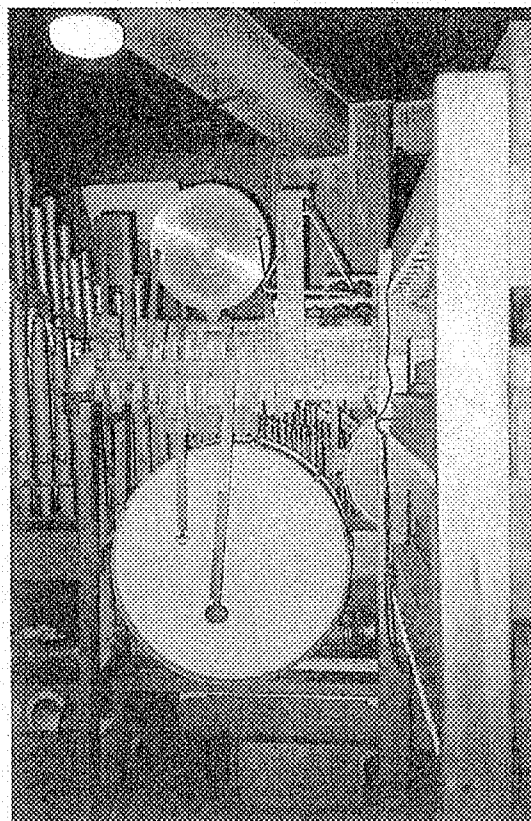
#### References

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Compton\\_\(organ\\_builder\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Compton_(organ_builder))
2. Aberdeen City Council Approval Notice for Planning Application (P101757) searchable on ACC website. Current Capitol Planning application is (P101757).
3. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cumbria-19270424>

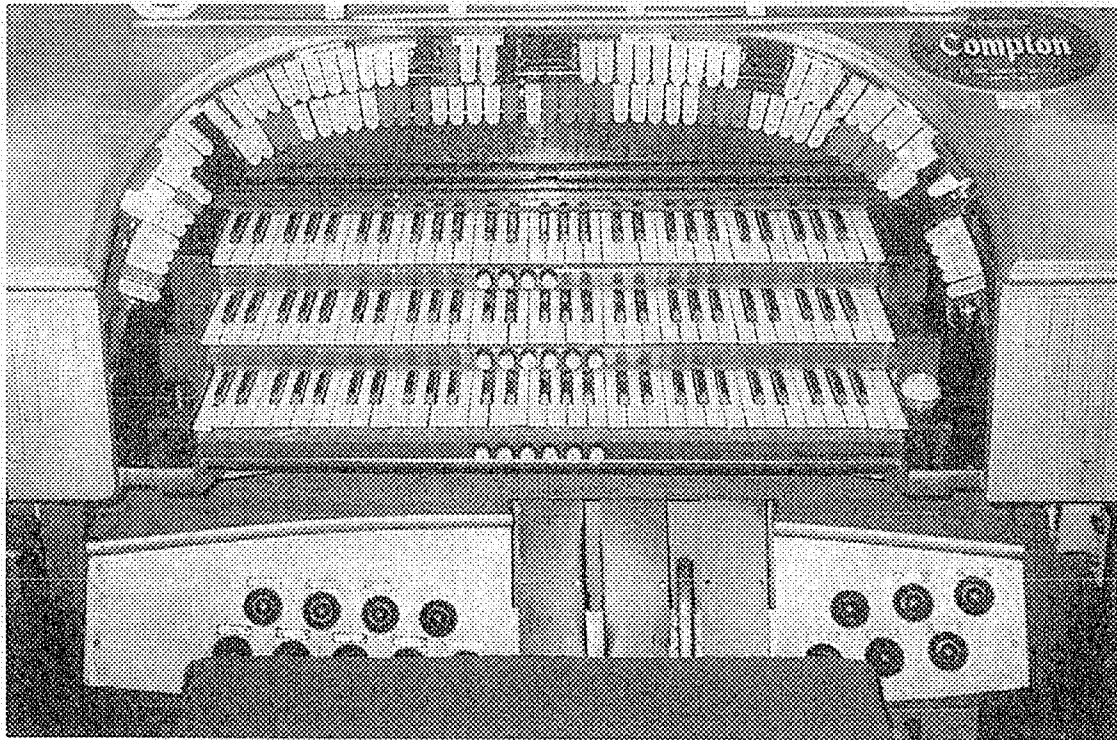
Photographs:



Capitol Compton Cinema Organ



Percussion



Capitol Compton Console

## Last act for Capitol Cinema?

As another demolition threat looms over Union Street's once great Capitol, new Aberdeen Voice writer Murray Henderson looks at the fortunes of Aberdeen's slumbering star of the silver screen.

*Aberdeen's most prestigious cinema. Its facade is of classical proportion. In the centre, soaring above the entrance is a simple pediment, which originally carried the name "Capitol" in neon letters. Inside, grand staircases swept up to the lofty circle and stalls foyers. In the auditorium was the great Compton Organ, whilst Holophane lighting glowed seductively. The Capitol is unique, an outstanding building which deserves a full restoration<sup>1</sup>.*

**The Theatres Trust.**

The Capitol Cinema once captivated Aberdonians with the latest movies and an Art-Deco interior direct from a Hollywood set. It is one of the few remaining "super cinemas" from the pre-war boom, akin to Brixton Academy or the Edinburgh Playhouse. Though the last film was shown in the 1960s, the Capitol continued to host rock concerts<sup>2</sup> as late as 1998.

A hammer blow to the Capitol came in 2002 with the arrival of Chicago Rock/Jumping Jacks and their proposal for two separate nightclubs. Despite public objection, Historic Scotland backed the plans, and the council voted in their favour<sup>3,4</sup>, enabling sweeping modifications to be made to the building.

The auditorium was split horizontally in two, and an all new identity imposed, destroying much of the original character. The Theatres Trust condemned the alterations as "brutal" and "a disgraceful failure of the historic building control system" comparable only to one other in the UK, the Philharmonic Hall in Cardiff<sup>5</sup>.

In 2009, the Chicago Rock/Jumping Jacks owners entered receivership and the clubs were closed. The credit crunch, smoking ban and cheap supermarket alcohol were cited as reasons for their demise<sup>2</sup>. In 2010, another planning application was submitted for full demolition of the Capitol's auditorium and an eight storey hotel and office development in its place. The plan was granted approval though never implemented.

As details emerge about the new proposals, the future of the Capitol is once again in the hands of developers and a city council which believes there is neither the money nor the public demand for its restoration<sup>2</sup>.

According to the British Film Institute (BFI), this story is common across the UK. Traditional cinemas have been unable to compete with the multiplexes and their closures have contributed to the decline of many city centres. The BFI attributes this to the multiplex's larger screen size, improved sound quality, better choice of films and greater all-round convenience.

But typically, their design is uniform and unadventurous, with many resembling industrial warehouses. Inside, multiplex auditoria are bland, blank voids, utilising the 'black box' concept in which the viewer has the least possible distraction from the screen<sup>6</sup>.

Despite the dominance of multiplexes, there are pockets of resistance. The old mining town of Bo'ness had, in the dilapidated Hippodrome, Scotland's first purpose-built cinema. After languishing in a state of neglect for 30 years, the cinema was recently restored in spectacular style and this year proudly celebrated its centenary.

According to the Theatres Trust, community stewardship is often a theatre's best chance of salvation. However, this takes hard work, dedication, and significant funding, which can come from grants or philanthropic sources. If the theatre is saved, the hard work continues in maintaining a programme of events and ensuring it is financially viable<sup>7</sup>.

This model is driving another success story in Glasgow in the Britannia Panopticon, the oldest surviving Music Hall in Britain, which at one time also functioned as a cinema. With members of the public as curators, a charitable trust has been set up with the goal of full restoration. Regular shows have resumed, and the importance of the building is now being realised by the wider public<sup>8</sup>.

These examples show that a niche does exist for cinemas like the Capitol. Their distinctive architecture gives a true sense of theatre befitting the drama on screen which the drab, corporate multiplex cannot rival. Their survival depends largely on the extent of historical alterations made to them, but perhaps more importantly, how much they are valued by the public and city councils as part of our heritage.

It is clear that in its current situation, the Capitol Cinema has a considerable mountain to climb if it is to join the Hippodrome or the Britannia. But cinema's greatest stars do have the habit of making the most unlikely comebacks. In the Capitol's case, the show is not over until the curtain comes down.

#### References

1. Theatres Trust "Guide to British Theatres 1750-1950".
2. Aberdeen Council Planning Decision Notice for Application Ref: P101757.
3. Aberdeen City Planning Committee Minutes 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2002.
4. Aberdeen City Council Meeting Minutes Town House, 1st May, 2002.
5. [www.theatrestrust.org.uk](http://www.theatrestrust.org.uk)
6. British Film Institute Website
7. Email correspondence with The Theatres Trust.
8. Email correspondence with the Britannia Panopticon Music Hall.

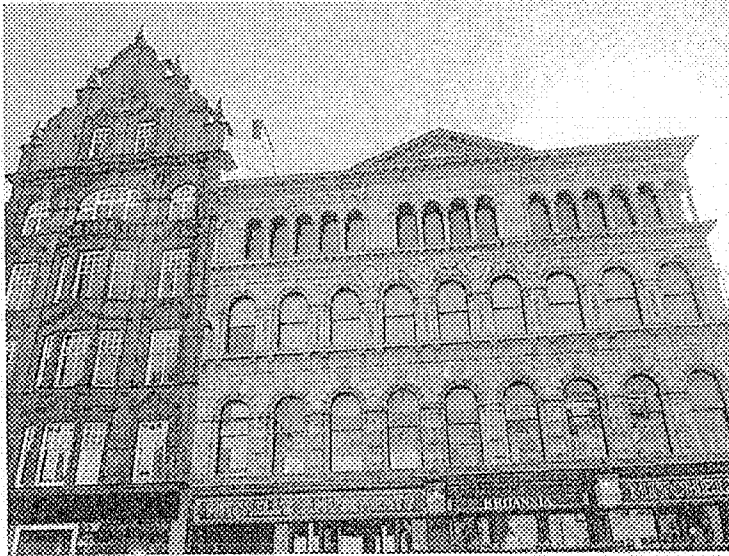
Photographs.



The Capitol in its heyday.



The return of the Hippodrome has reinvigorated Bo'ness.



Britannia Panopticon Music Hall gleams after work to the exterior.

P&SD Letters of Representation		
Application Number: 130616		
RECEIVED 21 JUN 2013		
Ncr	Sou <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MAo
Case Officer Initials: LG		
Date Acknowledged: 25/06/13		