



Reclaim Gaumont

(Mecca) in Taunton for Civic, Community, Entertainment, Arts & Non-Cultural Use

ABOUT THE BUILDING

A SHORT HISTORY



The second cinema in Taunton to bear the name Odeon was initially opened as the Gaumont Palace Theatre on 11th July 1932 with Renate Muller in "Sunshine Susie". It was built for Albany Ward, a division of Gaumont British Theatres. It featured a restaurant at first floor level above the main foyer, which had decorative freizes of birds and flowers painted by artist Frank Barnes. In the auditorium, the decoration was elaborate with shell-like wall sconces and a highly decorated ceiling panel. The proscenium was 50 feet wide and the stage was 74 feet wide, and 21 feet deep. There were eight dressing rooms.

It was renamed Odeon in 1969, and was closed by the Rank Organisation on 5th September 1981.

From November 1981 it was converted into a Top Rank Bingo Club, which later became a Mecca Bingo Club. The former projection box has been converted into offices, but the auditorium and foyers remains pretty well intact. It also retains many of its external features, the canopy has been enclosed in light blue metal cladding.

The former Gaumont Palace is a Grade II Listed building and much of the top floor is not used by Mecca Bingo.

If you have never been in this amazing building, who use to show big names of the past such as The Beatles, David Bowie and many more, you should as its one of Taunton's greatest treasures. We want to bring back civic pride by reclaiming it as a multi-purpose venue.

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About
TABCA

ABOUT TAUNTON ARTS BUSINESS CULTURAL ALLIANCE (TABCA)

Taunton Arts Business Cultural Alliance is a group of citizens, community groups, businesses and advocates who have a strong desire to have a say in what they want for Taunton and build a proactive inclusive arts and culture community.

We believe Taunton and its communities are defined by its arts and culture sector: Our cultural organisations, artists, musicians, performers and proud history of creative expression are a crucial part of our identity, vitality, and economic growth. As a membership and service organisation working on behalf of this sector, we believe in supporting the growth of arts organisations and their audiences and bringing back a thriving town centre.

TABCA is part of Somerset Arts Business Cultural Alliance (SABCA); a 150 strong membership and Community Interest Company (not-for-profit) No.12197272.



The 'Reclaim Gaumont' as a Multi-Purpose Venue Project

Introduction

Since 1932 this building in Corporation Street has always been a place where people meet, digest entertainment and culture and was the civic pride of Taunton.

Over 10 years ago a local man Jim Laflin and his volunteers campaigned to reclaim the Mecca Bingo Hall for the community (formally known as The Gaumont). Though great strides were made such as support from the local council, it never happened as the Rank Company who owned the building did not want to sell.

In 2014 TABCA took this baton and started a fresh campaign. With a focus on looking more at what the business model for making it a multi-purpose venue should be and what potential successes it could offer to make it viable, while uniting the local creative industries in new and innovative ways to ensure all benefit.

It wants to take an all-inclusive approach to its development by involving local people and groups. It wants to ensure that economic and social prosperity remains locally. Creating jobs, boosting town centre trade and the night-time economy, while utilising existing assets rather than having to build them.

TABCA also wants to develop a robust business plan and investment strategy that utilises 'inward investment' approaches as well as other feasibility studies around other forms of investment such as community share schemes, along with potential talks with public funding bodies. Twinned with a private investment strategy that will be attractive to philanthropists and social investors.

Such endeavours clearly define that the organisation that runs the Gaumont as an entertainment venue should be a charity with a trading arm and along with this should be a proactive fundraising plan. We want to set this up with support from the council.

Though we are for any large multi-purpose venue (MPV) in Taunton, we know it is cheaper to reclaim Mecca Bingo than build a new MPV. For example, the Macmillan Theatre in Bridgwater has 350 seats, cost around £7m to build, and has the existing college car park to support its visitors. The Gaumont is 1100-seater, so to build a new one of the same size we can use the Macmillan cost as a multiplier which shows this would be around £22m. If located in Firepool we know that parking construction will be required too. Using valuable land that could be used for more commercial purposes.





Our Goals Are For The Sustainability of the Venue

We know that the economic impact stands up. For instance, surveys show that many people eat, drink, pay for local transport etc. when attending events. If 1000 people attend an event and each spend £40 per person that would equate to £40,000 spend in the local economy. Times that by 25 big events each year (minimum) that would bring £1m into the local economy. Not forgetting additional income from other events throughout the year. The use of existing car parks (rather than building new ones) and park-and-rides would also secure more revenue. For large 1000-seater venues our research has shown that they sell, as a minimum, 250,000 tickets per year. So, get those 250,000 to spend £40 in the local economy and that could generate £10m per annum.

It has also been agreed by the many consultants commissioned by the council over the past 15 years, that the logical proposed 'cultural quarter' is best suited in the Castle Green area

due to other cultural and social spaces such as the museum, Goodlands Gardens, Castle Green and others.

Additionally, there has been concerns that Firepool location may not maximise footfall for the town centre if any MVP was placed there. Whereas, reclaiming The Gaumont would in fact increase footfall and make empty commercial properties an attractive investment for businesses.

We understand that if The Gaumont was reclaimed for MVP use, retro fitting it for today's staging, conferencing, entertainment and seating needs would be costly. Yet, this can be achieved in stages but is estimated to be around £1.5m. We propose to take this stage-by-stage approach within the Gaumont business plan.

As for the activities that go on in theatres spaces or MVP's like The Gaumont, one needs to under-

BOTH YOUTH & OLDER GROUPS CATERED FOR



stand the marketplace. For example, The Gaumont is similar to spaces like Bristol Hippodrome, where big names from the comedy, live music and musical theatre circuit can perform. However, big theatre shows, such as Cats, Lion King etc. only perform in venues that have 2500+ seats.

Plus, it's about economics of scale. For example, research we have done on other new venue proposals throughout the UK show that a 1000 or 1200-seater venue is best for bigger productions. In fact, at 1000 seats, venues present primarily one-night events; at 1200 seats, the programme is made up primarily of weekly runs. Such variants can be analysed through a feasibility study to inform the business plan.

We believe it's also important to look at competition. At present in Somerset there are only a few venues that have 350 seats, such as The Macmillan Theatre in Bridgwater (built 2015 estimated at £7m to build). The Octagon in Yeovil has a 622 capacity. Cedars Hall in Wells has 350 and The Playhouse in Weston Super-mare has 644 seating capacity. The Brewhouse in Taunton has 350 seating and Tacchi-Morris has 250 seats. The Gaumont in Taunton has 1100 capacity. Here we can clearly see that any MVP for Taunton should not compete with other venues but with 1100 seats it will attract different entertainment providers than these smaller venues.

We also believe there should be an equally strong focus on non-cultural activities. Gaumont as a mid-sized venue in Taunton would need to be a multifunctional hub, with other ways to generate footfall and boost income (e.g. conferencing, exhibitions, trade shows, fairs and markets, indoor ice rink, food and drink festivals, indoor sporting events (e.g. boxing, wrestling etc.), Expo's, other festivals, venue/meeting room hire, etc.)

What Data Says

48% of local people living in Taunton want to reclaim the Mecca Bingo Hall

82% of people purchase food locally when going out for entertainment and 55% drink elsewhere before and after

£10 Million Pounds to Economy. Once established this venue could contribute as much as £10m in just five years and create jobs and boost local business

95% of the population of Taunton believe that Taunton Deane Brough Council should invest in culture and entertainment within Taunton

Source: Taunton Entertainment Survey 2016/17

These 'non-cultural' uses would need to be included in the business plan but our research has also shown that it would be unwise to think that Taunton will attract very large conferences or trade shows as often these are associated with large conurbations and not the size of the venue. In addition we believe that there is enough non-cultural activity to deliver a robust financial plan that makes profit and supports the venue with little or no public funding in the future.

In addition to the above we also want to see a strong community-focused creative industries lead ecosystem that emanates from the Gaumont. With other rooms throughout the building and with a strong connection to all local arts and culture providers we can help broker creative activities to other smaller venues throughout Somerset West & Taunton (TABCA is holding a providers network event to be held in the very near future).

What Do We Want & What To Do Next

Our campaign to reclaim The Gaumont as an MVP started before the local council purchased the building. But now that it is public knowledge that the council has purchased this building we feel that it should be reclaimed for entertainment and non-cultural use and run by local people who have the skills and knowledge to make it succeed.

To this end, we propose to the council (without commitment from them) to develop the following:

An 'Inward Investment' Group for Mecca Reclaim Project

We know the council, funders and investors need evidence and reassurance that making Mecca an MVP is going to work. So creating an Inward Investment group whose sole purpose is bring such things together is an important part of the strategy. By helping the council find investment and funds we not only get closer to making Gaumont an entertainment and MVP venue again but also secure a structured and prosperous future for the business model used.

What does this inward investment group look like?

It's actually quite simple. We simply search for large grants and investments and obtain 'promise notes' as such to build an investment portfolio. We host meetings and nurture

inquiries to fruition. The old DHSS building opposite the multi-storey car park is a fine example, or indeed vacant land like Firepool. In short, construction companies don't build until they sell the property first. The Quantum Group project in Paul Street sold all the apartments before construction. We need to do the same, and who better than business focused professionals from the arts and culture sector who have local prosperity in their hearts.

TABCA committee has already agreed to invest in a glossy website and brochure to sell the vision to grant providers and investors, and we believe with the right conversations we could approach the likes of Arts Council England (ACE), National Lottery, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Arts Impact Fund (Nesta), New ERDF replaced funds from HOTSW (LEP), etc.

These funding and investment products that we wish to sell would include a variety of activities and not just infrastructure such as:

1. Retro fit to make good the venue for staging events, seating etc.
2. To develop certain hubs within the building such as theatre, music, art, community engagement, workshops/courses, etc.
3. To develop revenue centres such as food, drink, retail, hire, non-cultural activities, etc.

Additionally, we would look at the feasibility of alternative investment schemes such as community shares to build revenue. For example, Hastings Pier was owned by the council and the community wanted to rebuild it and raised money through shares. Offering local people a piece of the pie can create better civic pride and value too.

Future Programming Development

Imagine just for a moment that we managed to get £1.5m to refit The Gaumont (whether that be grants or investment or both). But that is not enough. The place needs to secure punters visiting the place to make it viable.

But if we had 'promise notes' from certain agencies/performers stating that they would perform there we could secure a realistic revenue plan that would be attractive to the council, funders and investors.

For example, through the TABCA committee alone we have members who can bring in these from a range of entertainment sectors:

- Orchestral and international connections in the classical music industry.
- UK theatre connections (production and touring)
- National comedy connections
- Big national bands and music artists
- And many more

Business Plan

Any venture like this needs a business plan and this can be very basic at the beginning. But with our professional approach and ideas, and help from the community and commercial sector, we can make it better.

Therefore, we would like to develop a business plan to reclaim The Gaumont as an MVP.

What We Need From The Council

We propose that the council recognise us formally as the group to be tasked with these duties, which will eventually inform the council on whether investment into the Gaumont as an MVP is viable to them and what that looks like.

However, it is clear that commitment from the council in some form; before we go to market to attract investment; will make attracting funding much easier. Therefore, we propose a meeting with the council as to what this might be. For example:

1. Council may sell the building or half of it to the people/investors
2. Council may gift the building for two years while it generates profits and reserves
3. Council may inject or match funding from grant providers. Etc.

To enable us to do all these studies, planning and attracting investment we would like to see some funding to allow us to do these tasks. Our investment equates to around £20,000 of goods and services from our members, but with some working capital in the form of an SLA from the council we could deliver a more robust plan and invite a wider network of investors.





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Public sector & project inquiries

If you have an inquiry regarding Taunton Arts Business Cultural Alliance public sector services please contact chairman Andrew Knutt on 07739 631850.

Membership inquiries

TABCA is part of Somerset Arts Business Cultural Alliance (SABCA) and has over 150 members throughout Somerset. If you are a practitioner, organisation, community group, business or supporter of arts and culture you can join for free by visiting our website at **www.somersetculture.org.uk**.