



# The Regis Centre Reimagined

*A summary of  
proposals by*

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## Introduction

I am a local business owner with cinemas and other property throughout the UK. My proposals do not involve the sale of any land in the medium term, which during the current unstable market conditions, and the unknown economic state the council and the country as a whole will find itself in post Covid is clearly much less of a risk to The Council.

The suggestions I have would serve to fulfil many of the aspirations of the Council by providing the preferred elements, whilst leaving the door open for more extensive redevelopment when the time is more favourable. This would effectively create a holding position for the council in the meantime without incurring high costs or loss of assets. Regeneration would be achieved by revitalising the town centre with a new and exciting flexible space, introducing new business outlets to create jobs and increase footfall. It would work exceptionally well with the newly revamped Place St Maur to create an attractive and vibrant waterfront attraction.

The Regis Centre was divided in 1996. The theatre was untouched, and the seaward facing end was partitioned and converted by Whitbread to create the current bar and restaurant. The conversion was done very quickly, and with little permanent or irreversible alterations. In essence all Whitbread have done is fitted out a shell inside what is an existing function room, but everything else remains as was and crucially, the Hall is still there.

## Background

The building was cut in half, leaving the main facilities on the theatre side, and all else kept intact. All the backstage facilities were built to serve both spaces and are still there.

Within the big roof voids, two managers flats were subsequently built by Whitbread's, which are still in use, but that has not impacted on the services, which are situated above them and remain untouched and functional.

Just prior to the conversion a brand new lighting gantry was purchased and installed, that remains in situ, and in perfect working order. Heating and air handling systems were mothballed in situ, in the roof of the former Royal Hall- currently the kitchens for Whitbread. The air ventilation and heating as well as the lighting gantries are all connected into the plant room, untouched above the flat and kitchens for the Royal Hall, so the fundamental elements for operating the venue are still there and still useable.

Originally the glass atrium that you see now, extended all the way down the side of the building, past where the dividing wall is now, and opened up into a square space, and on to the Place St Maur. This was the original main entrance - a double height atrium space. This was taken down by Whitbread and changed into a chiller room/beer cellar. The remaining section of foyer was changed into toilets for Whitbread's side. However, it could all easily revert back- even the flooring tiles of that room are the same, continuous from the Theatre side into the Whitbread side, to the chiller room.

In essence, it would cost very little compared to replacement, to put the Regis Centre building back to how it once was, fully refurbish it, and to clad the outside. It would look a very different building if this were done sympathetically, and indeed there are many examples of this already, elsewhere. Bear in mind that a theatre and large hall is always going to be a box like building, by its' very nature, so whatever goes in its' place is likely to be similar in terms of mass, shape and footprint.

The Sydney Opera House is surprisingly very similar in construction to the Regis Centre, in terms of its' modernist brutal concrete and brick structure, but is recognisable everywhere as an iconic and beautiful building, much admired all over the world, whereas the Regis Centre is widely regarded as 'ugly' albeit a very similar type of construction fundamentally. This perception could be changed with some minimal costs to enhance the exterior with lighting and promoting the flexibility of the internal space and what it could potentially host, alongside the exciting planned refurbishments to the Place St Maur, which it would then open on to. A reimaged Regis Centre, theatre and Royal Hall opening up on to the Place may not be a radical change that some are hoping for, but this is a time when perhaps plunging into a large regeneration project necessitating the sale of land and construction of flats may not be appropriate, and would ultimately simply replace one large multi function room for another, albeit newer.

## Business Case

Having a large function hall in addition to the theatre is a much more viable solution.

Amateur dramatic groups can afford to rent the theatre due to its compact size, as well as the university and touring companies. However, there would be a great deal of potential and scope for more theatrical performances if the building was opened up again, since the Hall would be able to accommodate some of the acts that are currently using the theatre, such as tribute bands for example, which would work better in a hall. The hall would generate the main income and would greatly enhance revenue streams and open up the building to much more flexible use, enabling costs to be kept down to the smaller groups who may otherwise be outpriced. Multi-purpose theatre venues, which I know some councillors favour, do not work well in practice- they are too expensive to convert and labour intensive to switch from one use to another in between performances. Simple research of other areas where they have these will bear this out.

The existing hall if converted back to use again could be used, for example, as a temporary ice rink, for indoor events, exhibitions, functions, weddings, conferences etc. We are all agreed that a large indoor flat floor space is what Bognor is missing; it could deliver all the aspirations and be a flexible space and -best of all it already exists. Temporary attractions that could be brought in to further mitigate the risk of putting all of the Regeneration eggs in one basket by building a venue to host one type of activity, future proofing it for younger generations whose leisure requirements in a digital era are constantly shifting.

The original foyer on the Place St Maur could be rebuilt, but as an attractive wintergarden with a restaurant, as the hall would be there for events, this could be delivered in a second phase when funds allowed. The main building could stay open, and the hall converted back, and then the other side of the building closed to enable a refit of the theatre - meaning very little disruption compared to completely demolishing and rebuilding.

Another major advantage is that the main entrance to the theatre could easily switched to the car park side, so that there would be no disruption to the theatre whilst the wintergarden foyer, and other works continued to be undertaken on the other side of the building, thus ensuring continuity. Plans have previously been drawn up to increase the capacity of the theatre to 500 seats and have a full fly tower fitted (essential for large productions for storing sets).

Over the dressing rooms at the side of the building there is a huge amount of unused space- being almost double height inside. Here the roof could be squared off, resulting in an ideal and affordable hire/rehearsal/meeting room space for local groups, so the current studio area could become a the new Royal Sussex Wintergardens.

The Royal Hall formerly sat 550 people, and had the biggest sprung dance floor on the south coast - possibly even still underneath the flooring that Whitbread have installed. It used to be used for functions and exhibitions, bands, shows, concerts, the world famous clown convention, election counts and numerous other activities and events. We have no flat floor space currently and this option would provide that whilst leaving the theatre to continue as is, but with the additional theatre seats as per the plans, the theatre would also become more viable and attract a better quality and range of entertainers.

With minimal cost and disruption this leaves the door open for much more extensive regeneration when the time to do so is more favourable



Regis Centre as built 1980 showing place entrance

**Arun can deliver much of what people want by retaining and enhancing what it already has.**

## Lease and Whitbread

I am well aware of the issues with Whitbread and the Lease. However, the building is not in a great state of repair and has suffered greatly over the years from a lack of investment. With this in mind, and with Whitbread a company not in good health with Covid hitting the sector hard, Arun as landlord could draw up a dilapidations order, which would run into many thousands of pounds. At the end of the lease, which has only 25 years to go now- they need to return the building back to how it was. If Whitbread were reminded of this, they may well consider walking away now, and investing elsewhere, rather than see out the term of the lease, and face the dilapidations and re conversion costs later.

This is why it is not prudent to offer them a very favourable deal in terms of a land swap, as the value is not there, 25 years is a fairly insignificant amount of time and any deals with Whitbread should not be disproportionate to the value in the Lease.

## Town Hall

Further to my proposal to utilise the Regis Centre as a short to medium term solution, to provide the town with a much needed facility at a low cost, the council could even consider disposing of Littlehampton Civic centre, selling off the land or building council flats there, and moving staff fully into Bognor town hall, with rebuilt offices on the fire station, and using space in the arcade and Town Hall. The Regis Centre/ Royal Hall could be used for full council- as was the case many years ago. The town hall is going to be a very difficult asset to dispose of and is fully listed internally and externally so this would seem to provide a reasonable solution to that problem too, and bring some much-needed income into the council from selling the Civic Centre off. In this scenario the council also get to keep the lucrative car park, until such times as the whole site can be redeveloped in the future.

## A Phased Approach to Implement the Scheme

See attached Plan (A)

### Phase 1

Should the council agree with this proposal, negotiations would need to take place with Whitbread as soon as possible over the Lease, and remuneration to be given to Arun for the land for the Hotel. Possession of the Regis Centre could then take place following further negotiations with Arun Arts, so there is then a realistic potential for work to start by the end of the year. Looking at older plans it may be that it is only Building Regs that are required and not planning permission for the initial phase.

This first phase includes reinstating the old Royal hall, foyer spaces, cafes and kitchen once Whitbread vacate.

## Phase 2 - See Attached Drawings (B)

Phase 2 involves the construction of a new rehearsal and studio space over the existing dressing rooms on the car park side of the building. It includes a new set of toilets including a 'Changing Space', as well as a small hall space, 'The Queens Hall' a new addition, to be built on the existing staff car park (currently leased to Whitbread). Also, facilities for offices in the former shop area, and a temporary foyer space in order for the building to remain open as much as possible during Phase 3.

The fire exit on the carpark side, and the newly constructed Queens' Hall and toilets would form a temporary foyer and main entrance allowing the Regis Centre to continue to function so that Arun Arts can continue to fulfil their contracted obligations, and for continuity. Other works included in this phase would be an access staircase- forming a new emergency route for the theatre on both sides, a reconstruction of the theatre control room to facilitate works in phase 3 and 4.

## Phase 3 - See Attached Drawings (C)

This would involve full demolition of the foyer and studio one, the existing cafe space, and the sea-side end of the Whitbread Restaurant. The new "Royal Sussex Wintergardens" would be constructed, consisting of a double height glazed atrium. From the upper level of the Wintergarden it would therefore be possible to walk across the road to the upper level of the arcade via a glazed walkway. The walkway would also extend down to the seaward end of the building opening out on to the promenade, thus creating a spectacular and seamless link between town and sea. The current first floor office would be incorporated into the new Winter Gardens and redeveloped into a cocktail bar/coffee shop with spectacular views.

At the seaward end of the Winter Gardens on the first floor a new restaurant with outdoor terrace would open up on to the boardwalk.

## Phase 4

The refurbishment of the Theatre and backstage facilities, increasing the capacity to 500 seats and installing a Fly Tower. During this phase The Royal Hall, the new Queens Hall and the Winter Gardens would be fully functional and able to generate income whilst the Theatre was being worked on.

## Potential Funding

From Whitbread's surrender of the lease and subsequent land swap resulting in some gain to the council. There are also possibilities of a Public Works Board Loan, serviced by the car park revenues, and longer term revenue from Hothampton developments, leasing of retail, restaurant and hotel on the site, or even selling or leasing the Civic Centre in Littlehampton for residential development, and relocating the offices to The Arcade, Fire Station and Town Hall, particularly as the success of working from home may mean that less extensive office space is required in future.

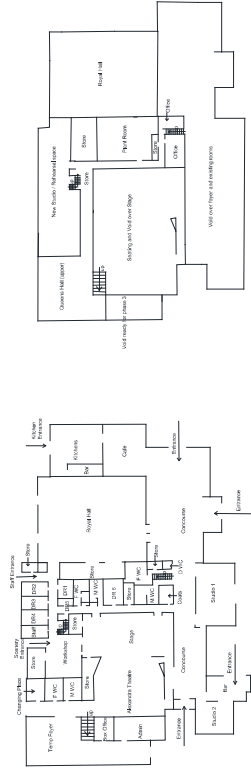
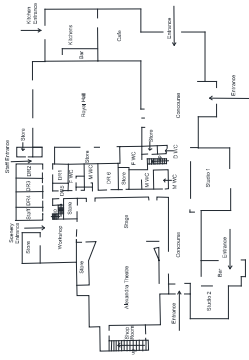


Artists Impression West Elevation of the Regis Centre Reimagined



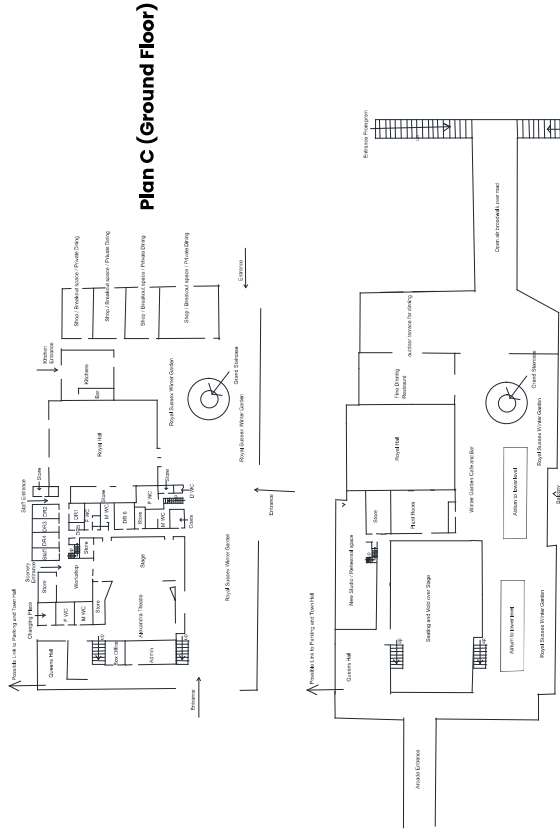
Artists Impression East Elevation of the Regis Centre Reimagined

**Plan A (ground floor)**



**Plan B (Ground Floor)**

**Plan B (First Floor)**



**Plan C (Ground Floor)**

**Plan C (First Floor)**

