

Filmhouse – talks continue about its future

Councillors will hear next week that the progress being made on reviving the Filmhouse will retain the building as a hub of cultural film and film education in Edinburgh, and that this is the core principle on which the council is involved in any discussions.

The council has plans to spread the distribution of film around the city using the cultural hubs which already exist, such as libraries with projection facilities. But all of this will happen after the building is reopened as a cinema under new management.

The Centre for the Moving Image (CMI) which owned Filmhouse and the Edinburgh International Film Festival (EIFF) went into liquidation last year. There are claims that it was the Aberdeen side of operations, the Belmont, which dragged Edinburgh under financially, as Filmhouse traded successfully for three decades until the merger with EIFF under the CMI umbrella.

A movement to save the Filmhouse was one of the first responses in the wake of the charity's collapse leaving around 100 people redundant and the cinema building lying empty.

But the real outpouring of love has been for the building

itself at 88 Lothian Road. That has now been bought by Kevin Doyle's Caledonian Heritable and the latest update to the council on what will happen with the building now will be delivered in a report to the Culture & Communities Committee at their meeting on 10 August. This responds to a demand by Cllr Finlay McFarlane that the council does all it can to ensure the future of Filmhouse.

A small short term group has been set up which includes the council, Creative Scotland, Screen Scotland, The Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise. Their purpose is "preserving the depth of diversity of cultural film provision and film education as the central use of 88 Lothian Road/Filmhouse, for the benefit of both Edinburgh and Scotland's screen and cultural audiences, filmmakers and creative practitioners".

A new charity – initially set up as a limited company – has been established called Filmhouse (Edinburgh) Ltd who want to take on a lease of the building. There are links between this company and CMI as some of the directors of the new company, but not all, previously worked at Filmhouse, and although they all have a lot of experience in running a cinema, they were not

senior management at CMI.

Filmhouse (Edinburgh) Limited, (FEL) was granted charitable status in June and the body is in exclusive discussions with Caledonian Heritable regarding a long lease on the building at 88 Lothian Road. The model will be that the charity runs the cinema and a café bar would be run under a separate trading company with profits going to the charity.

FEL was formed in late December 2022 by four former Filmhouse colleagues: James Rice, former programme manager and now a cinema strategist at specialist consultancy Mustard Studio, Rod White, former Head of Programming, David Boyd, former Head of Technical, and Ginnie Atkinson, former CEO of Filmhouse and Edinburgh International Film Festival until 2010.

Director Ginnie Atkinson said: “Being in advanced discussion with Caledonian Heritable is a significant step on the journey towards restoring cultural cinema provision for the city. We anticipate being able to make a further statement after the Festival.”

A Caledonian Heritable spokesperson said: “Caledonian Heritable have a long-standing appreciation of the vital importance of culture and the arts to the city of Edinburgh and are pleased to be working with Filmhouse (Edinburgh) Ltd in anticipation of a new era at this key cultural venue.”

Cllr Val Walker, Culture and Communities Convener said: “We are clear in our commitment to maintaining 88 Lothian Road as a world-class hub for independent, cultural cinema. We have been working closely with our partners at Creative Scotland/Screen Scotland, the Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise on forging a sustainable path forward for this Edinburgh institution, and spiritual home of the Edinburgh International Film Festival.

“The proposed new operators being considered by the building

owners are Filmhouse Edinburgh Ltd (FEL) which has recently applied for and been granted charitable status.

“We will continue to support our partners, the building owners, and FEL in our common goal to return 88 Lothian Road to its rightful place in Edinburgh’s cultural landscape.”

COMMERCIAL DEMAND

In negotiating with the owner of the building the group has encountered the usual commercial demand for a long-term rental guarantee. The company is of course new, although the directors previously ran the cinema when it was a successful operation and before it was taken over under the CMI umbrella.

It is clear that the council does not or will not take on the position of guarantor, and probably neither will the government, but while we understand that Caledonian Heritable are giving this possibility their blessing, their position is understandably cautious. The company paid just less than £2 million for the property earlier this year. Some investigation is being made into alternatives to any guarantee which would be acceptable to the landlord.

There is no premises licence to sell alcohol any longer as an application to renew the licence was rejected by the council earlier in the year, leading to Signature Group, a major pub operator in the city pulling out of discussions to buy the premises.

A capsule programme of films has been curated for a small EIFF this year under the banner of the Edinburgh International Festival. Details of the programme are [here](#).

The possible renovation of the Filmhouse is likely to be expensive. It was already noted that the condition of the building was not the best before it was sold by the administrators. Some modernisation costs will fall to be paid

for by the tenant, but the owner of the building is at present carrying out considerable repairs to the roof and drains to keep the building in some kind of repair meantime.

The council earmarked £100,000 for Filmhouse this year – exactly the same as last year, and including an underspend of £30,000 from last year’s budget this is the total approved funding for the council’s involvement in the project at present.



Filmhouse. Photo © 2023 Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com