

Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment Report

Proposed development at the Former Rialto Cinema, Banba Square, Nenagh
(Protected Structure RPS ref. TRPS2268)

The development will consist of refurbishment and repurposing for digital and enterprise hub use of the two storey former Rialto Cinema which sits to the north-east of the application site fronting onto Banba Square and development of the lands to the south and west of the Protected Structure for residential use with public realm and car parking.



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1. INTRODUCTION

This Architectural Heritage Impact Assessment has been prepared to accompany a planning application for a development at the former Rialto Cinema, Banba Square, Nenagh. The building is a corner-sited multiple-bay two and three-storey former cinema, opened 1946. The cinema closed in 1976 and was subsequently converted to use as a hardware shop. The building is now unused and vacant. The yard to the (north) side and rear includes stone rubble enclosing walls.

The building is a protected structure (RPS. Ref TRPS2268). This former cinema forms part of a cluster of significant buildings at Banba Square, including Nenagh Courthouse, the former Town Hall, the former Presbyterian Church, and Nenagh Garda Station (immediately adjacent to the cinema to the south-east. The site is bounded by Ashe Road (to the north). The yard to the rear of the cinema is bounded by Emmett Place (to the south).

The development will consist of refurbishment and repurposing for digital and enterprise hub use of the two storey former Rialto Cinema which sits to the north-east of the application site fronting onto Banba Square and development of the lands to the south and west of the Protected Structure for residential use with public realm and car parking. The nature and extent of the proposed development is noted below.

- I. Refurbishment with internal and external alterations to the Protected Structure (former Rialto Cinema) including installation of new windows and doors, building fabric upgrades for energy efficiency, building services installations, installation of a new lift which will access all floors, installation of new fully accessible toilets on the ground floor and first floor, installation of new first floor in lieu of non-original existing floor structure, new roof coverings and the removal of non-loadbearing infill material from flank elevations.
- II. The building has a gross internal area of circa 590m² on the ground floor, 585m² on the first floor and 50m² on the second floor giving a gross internal area of 1,225m².
- III. New single storey extension to the western (flank) elevation of the former Rialto Cinema building.
- IV. New first floor extensions to the southern (rear) elevation of the former Rialto Cinema building including new glazed openings to the existing southern (rear) elevation of the former Rialto Cinema building at ground and first floor.
- V. New glazed openings to the eastern and western (flank) elevations of the former Rialto Cinema building at ground and first floors.
- VI. Demolition of boundary walls to the north, south and (part) south-east of the application site.
- VII. Demolition of the single storey lean-to structures throughout the existing yard to the south and west of the former Rialto Cinema building.

This AHIA report has been prepared in accordance with the guidance set out in the *Architectural Heritage Protections Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (Department of Culture Heritage and Gaeltacht, 2011). The report includes a section on the evolution of the site and the history of the former cinema building, which has been informed by published sources as well as interviews with Mr. Kevin Whelan (a local historian, who was a regular patron of the Rialto in his youth) and Mr. Seamus (Shamey) McCarthy, who worked with his late father, Jimmy, in the projection booth. The report evaluates the impact of the proposed development and recommends mitigation measures, where possible and appropriate. Appendix A of this report contains photographs of the building, site and its environs taken during my inspection on 11th July 2023. Appendix B contains survey plans, on which the viewpoints of the photographs have been annotated. All photographs within this report were taken on the date of inspection, unless otherwise noted.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

2.1 NENAGH:

Nenagh is a prosperous market town occupying a strategically important location close to Lough Derg, the largest lake on the River Shannon. The Town is located nineteen miles to the north-east of Limerick on the main road between Limerick and Dublin. The town of Nenagh gives its name to the small river which runs through its centre and discharges into Lough Derg to the north-west

(near the village of Dromineer).

The name Nenagh is an anglicised abbreviation of *An Aonach*, which translates as ‘the fair’. The full name of the Town is *Nenagh Urmhumhan* which means ‘the fair of Ormond’ or ‘the fair of east Munster’. This reflects an historic association of the Town with the Butler (Ormond) family. Historically, the annual fair in Nenagh was an important focus for social, and commercial activity in the area and was a forum for the enactment of local legislation. The Town of Nenagh grew up around the early Anglo-Norman castle. The remains of the castle keep, locally known as the ‘Nenagh Round’ survives and comprises a substantial circular structure on one side of Pearse Street (formerly Castle Street) and was described by Harold Leask as ‘*the most remarkable structure of its kind*’. In circa 1200, a hospital was established by the Augustinian Order for the care of the sick and infirm¹. This was subsequently named St. John’s House, in honour of John the Baptist. Following the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, the lands held by the Augustinians were granted to Oliver Grace. In the thirteenth century a Franciscan Friary was also founded in the Town. Writing in 1837, Samuel Lewis noted that this was one of the richest monasteries held by the Franciscan Order in Ireland.

In common with most significant Anglo-Norman towns, Nenagh was enclosed by a town wall. There are records of a murage tax in 1305 for the construction and repair of the town wall and fortifications². No upstanding remains of this town wall survive, and the exact line of the wall is not known. There are records of the discovery of a section of the wall near the churchyard in Kenyon Street in the early nineteenth century, which provide the only clue to the possible line of the wall³.

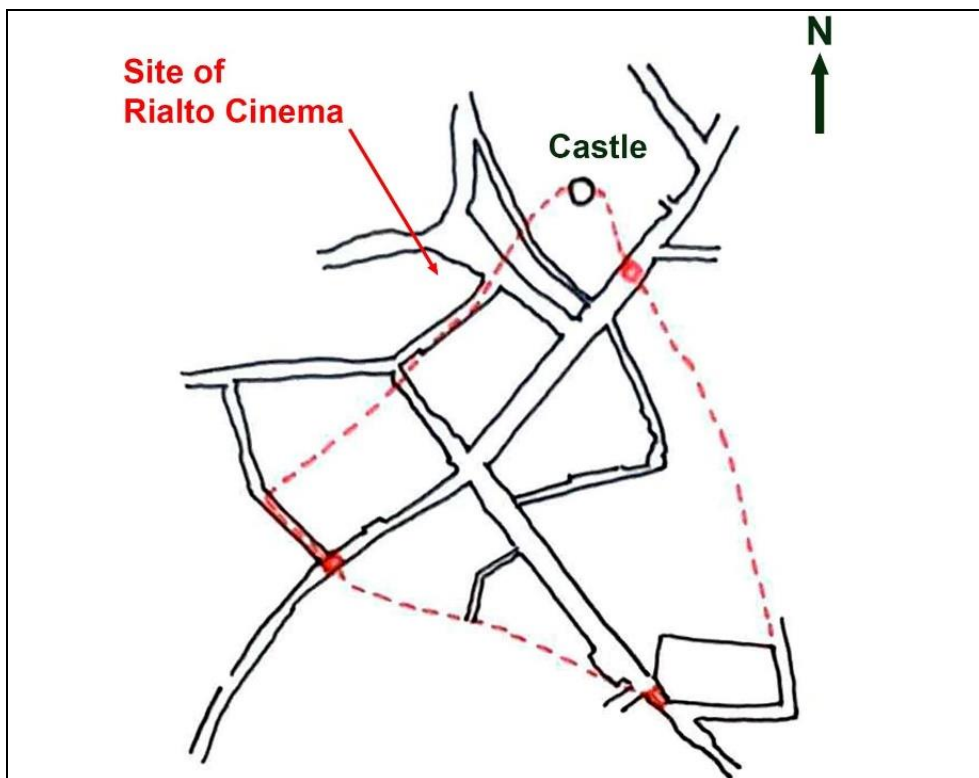


Fig. 1 Conjectural drawing of Nenagh Town Wall based on early-nineteenth century find near Kenyon Street (after drawing in unpublished archaeological report by Aegis, February 2012)

¹ Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, Vol. 2, p.422 (London: S. Lewis & Co., 1837).

² *Archaeological test excavation – Nenagh Castle, Nenagh, Co. Tipperary* (unpublished report by Brenda O’Meara, Margaret Gowan & Co. Ltd, May 2007), p 5

³ *Archaeological monitoring at Nenagh Castle, Co. Tipperary, as part of conservation works* (unpublished report by F. Coyne, Aegis, February 2012), p. 11

Nenagh experienced much turbulence during the latter half of the sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century. In 1548 an attack by O’Carroll led to the burning of the Town and Friary, although the Castle was saved by the local garrison. Nenagh was ⁴substantially reconstructed after this attack in c.1575, at which time it had to be reconstituted as a town as there were no burgesses or burgages.⁵ It is thought that a number of larger Elizabethan and Jacobite mansions may have been built as part of this reconstruction. One such mansion is believed to have been built by Walter, Earl of Ormond, as part of the dowry on the marriage of his daughter to Sir. George Hamilton in c.1630. While the locations of these larger large townhouses are not known, it is likely that their construction and design was similar to the stone rubble Tudor-style mansions that were constructed in Kilkenny City, Carrick-on-Suir and the surrounding area in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century.

In 1641 the Town was taken by Owen Roe O’Neill and subsequently reclaimed by Lord Inchiquin. In 1651, Henry Ireton, the English parliamentarian general who was married to Oliver Cromwell’s daughter, held the town during his march on Limerick. In 1688 the Town was captured by Anthony Carroll, an ally of Sarsfield. Carroll held the Town until he was forced to retreat due to the impending advance of forces under General Levison. During the course of his retreat, he burnt the Town⁶.

Nenagh began to evolve into its current form from the mid-1700s onwards following the sale of the Butler owned lands, and the granting of leases which facilitated the construction of residences, shops and small industries. At this time, Nenagh comprised four main streets converging on the Market Cross, off which were a series of narrow densely built laneways, typical of many eighteenth century Irish towns.

The growth of the town accelerated during the early decades of the nineteenth century. During the 1830s, the geographical county of Tipperary was divided into two Ridings and Nenagh acquired the status of County Town for Tipperary North Riding. This led to the construction of the County Gaol and Courthouse, as well as a workhouse and other public buildings. Nenagh Railway Station, on the Spur Line from Ballybrophy to Limerick, was opened in 1864.

Writing in 1881, George Henry Bassett noted:

‘Nenagh is considered to be a first rate business town. It is well built and the principle (sic) streets are broad and maintained in good condition. The merchants manifest considerable taste in the arrangement of their establishments, and are enterprising in the introduction of novelties.’⁷

The town continues to function as an important service centre within the north-west of County Tipperary, servicing a large rural hinterland which includes the surrounding towns of Toomevara, Silvermines, Newport, Borrisokane, and Cloughjordan. The population of the Town currently stands at circa 8,000.⁸

⁴ O’Meara, p.6

⁵ Farrelly, Jean and Carey, Hugh, *The Urban Archaeological Survey: County Tipperary North Riding*, p.44 (Dublin: The Office of Public Works, 1994)

⁶ Lewis, p.423.

⁷ George Henry Bassett, *County Tipperary One Hundred Years Ago: A Guide and Directory 1889*, p.273 (Belfast: The Friars Bush, Press 1991).

⁸ Based on the 2011 Census, as noted in the *Nenagh Town & Environs Development Plan 2013*

2.2 BANBA SQUARE

Banba Square is located outside of the line of the Medieval walled town centre of Nenagh. The construction of Nenagh Courthouse in 1838 to a design by the architect John Edward Keane⁹, provided the catalyst for the construction of the square. The first edition 6" Ordnance Survey map of 1838-42 (fig. 2) shows the newly constructed courthouse, together with its associated county gaol, standing on undeveloped land to the north-west of Castle Street (now Pearse Street). The courthouse is approached by a new street – Peter Street (now Kickham Street) – from where a splayed boundary wall runs west towards the courthouse. The cinema site comprises undeveloped land on the southside of this boundary wall. A newly constructed street, Bachelor's Walk, adopts a similar splay running north towards the entrance gatehouse of the gaol.

The decision to construct a County Gaol in Nenagh was a direct result of sub-division of the geographical county of Tipperary into a South Riding and North Riding in 1838. This led to the designation of Nenagh as the County Town for Tipperary North Riding. Writing in 1837, Samuel Lewis records the impending change in the structure of the judicial system in the Town one year prior to the completion of construction on the new County Gaol:

“General sessions are held twice a year, and petty sessions weekly; there is a courthouse for the meetings of the magistrates; also an old bridewell, consisting of three day rooms, nine cells and two yards. Application is about to be made to procure an act of parliament to make Nenagh an assize town.”



Fig. 2 First edition 6" Ordnance Survey map of Nenagh, showing the newly constructed courthouse to the north-west of Peter Street. The origins of the splayed geometry of the present day Banba Square can be traced to the line of the boundary wall to the south of the courthouse building.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the north-western end of Peter Street was completed as a symmetrical public space in front of the classical façade of the courthouse (fig. 3). The construction of a large bank building (the Provincial Bank) in 1864 and the Town Hall in 1889 consolidated this new nineteenth century public square as an administrative and civic hub in Nenagh, which was separate from the historic town centre at the Market Cross.

⁹ The combined budget was £25,000 of which £18,000 went towards the construction of the new County Gaol.

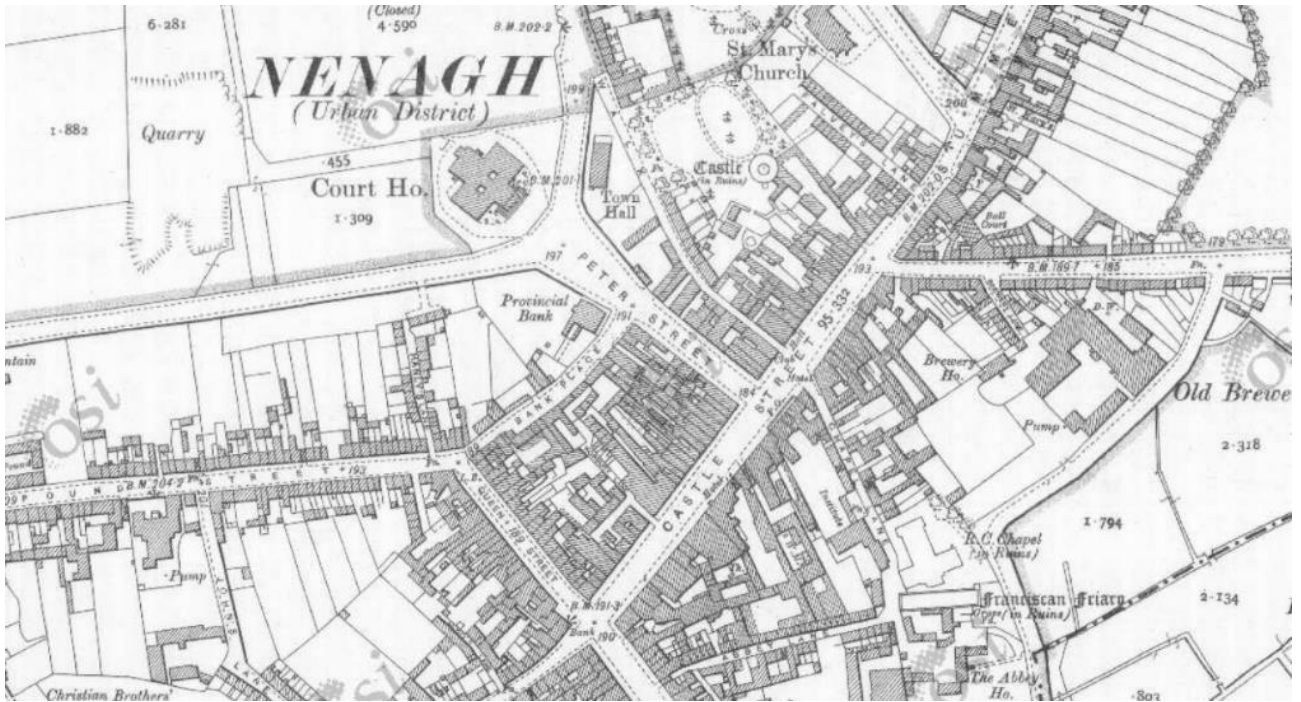


Fig. 3 25" Ordnance Survey map (1890-1900) showing the completed square in front of Nenagh Courthouse, with the Provincial Bank (on south side) and Nenagh Town Hall (on north side of square).



Fig. 4 Lawrence Collection photograph (c.1900) looking from the entrance portico of Nenagh Courthouse towards the Town Hall on the west side of Peter Street, with the 'Nenagh Round' (the keep of Nenagh Castle) in the background.

Through the first decades of the twentieth century, the civic status of the square was further enhanced by the construction of a presbyterian church (in 1906) and the erection of a central memorial to local republican volunteers who died in the 1916 rising and the War of Independence (in c.1930). Peter Street was renamed Kickham Street and the public square was renamed Banba Square, after the legendary Irish Goddess of the Tuatha Dé Danann, following the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. While the use of some of the buildings around the square has changed – the former town hall is now Nenagh Arts Centre; the former Presbyterian Church is now leased to Foróige for provision of youth services; the former bank has been converted to use as the town's Garda Station; and the republican monument has (somewhat incongruously) been altered to include a life-size statue of Christ (in 1955) and the names of the Long Kesh hunger strikers of 1981 – Banba Square remains an

important civic focal point within the town centre of Nenagh.



Fig. 5 Recent photograph of Banba Square looking north-west towards the courthouse (centre, with republican memorial in front) with the former bank (now Garda Station, foreground) and the vacant Rialto Cinema (background) on the left, and the former Presbyterian Church (now tourism information office, foreground) and town hall (now Nenagh Arts Centre, background) on the right.

2.3 RIALTO CINEMA

The Rialto Cinema was designed by W.M. O'Dwyer and constructed within the walled grounds of the Provincial Bank (now Nenagh Garda Station) on the south side of Banba Square. The cinema opened on 1st September 1946 with the musical comedy *"On Stage Everybody"*, starring Jack Oakie. The external frontage (onto Banba Square) adopted the clean lines and curved shapes of the Modern Movement. Internally, the building had Art Deco flourishes. The foyer had a green and cream terrazzo floor and there was a snack bar, ticket booth and soda fountain, located on the right of the glazed entrance doors. The auditorium had 900 seats, a balcony, and a Western Electric (WE) sound system fitted. The Rialto was originally operated by Amalgamated Entertainments (established by the cinema entrepreneur, Kevin Anderson, as an early venture in the cinema business).



Fig. 6 Historic photograph of the Rialto, taken shortly after its opening in 1946. This photograph pre-dates the erection of the statue of Christ on the republican monument (left hand side of photograph).

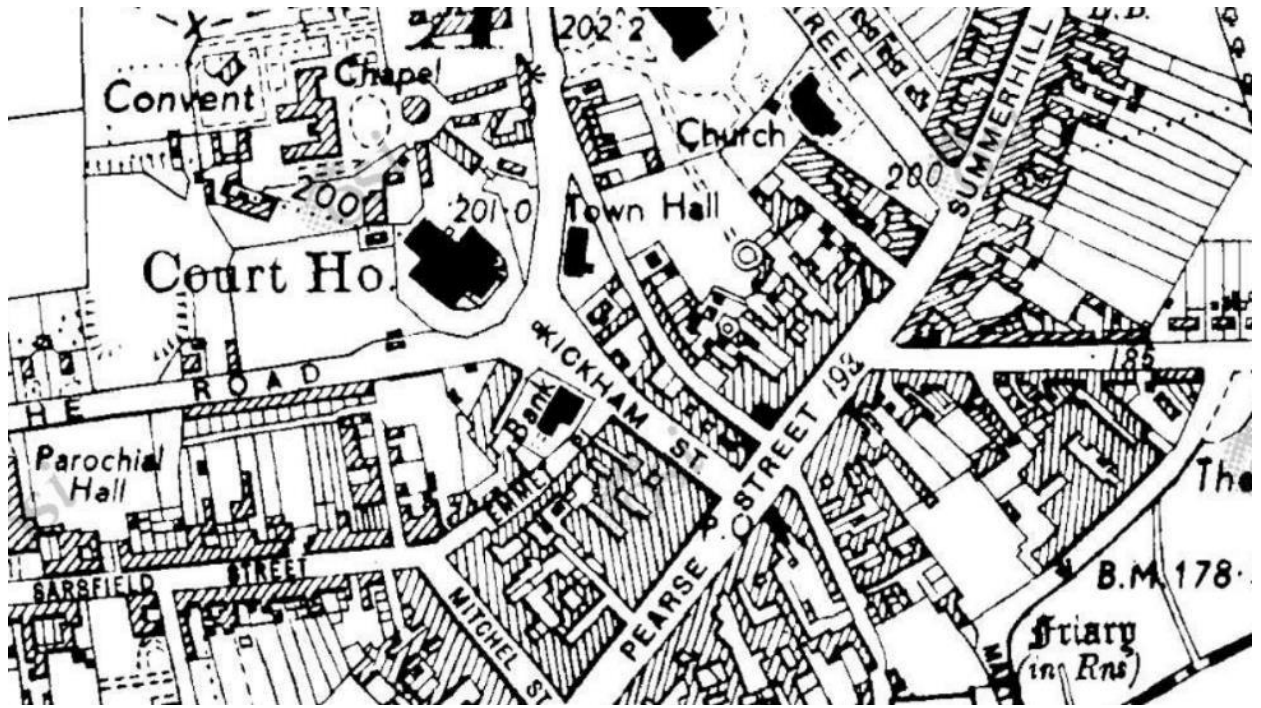


Fig. 7 Last edition 6" Ordnance Survey map of Nenagh (1955-57), showing the Rialto Cinema to the north-west of the Provincial Bank.

The Rialto was sold to the Breen family in the mid-1950's. Entry to The Parterre in the Rialto Cinema cost nine old pennies at that time. By the late-1960's, the cinema specialised in double-bills of second run and established movies, with the programme changing at least twice every week (fig. 8). Performances were timed to end no later than 10.45pm each evening. It was locally rumoured that the projectionists, Jimmy McCarthy and Christy Sherlock, would occasionally cut the films to ensure that they made closing time of 11pm at the local pub. The viability of single screen large cinemas in rural Irish towns had begun to diminish by the mid-1970's. The Rialto Cinema closed on 1st May 1976, less than 30 years after it opened, with "Breezy" starring Kay Lenz and William Holden. The former cinema was sold to the Kilroy Family, who operated a furniture store in the building, and subsequently was occupied by Sheahan's hardware shop. The building was altered to accommodate these new uses – the public foyer on the first floor landing was subdivided to provide office space, a mezzanine floor was introduced within the auditorium, and the original windows (presumably of steel frame construction) were replaced.



Fig. 8 Collection of programmes for the Rialto Cinema from the 1960's¹⁰



Fig. 9 Exterior of the Rialto Cinema in the mid-1970's, shortly before the cinema closed down (photograph from collection of Kevin Whelan)

¹⁰ Photograph from facebook page of Seamus O'Brien

(https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid05pKofRPeJ8ytgNgQVCi1jenEBA3YdjtzFqVoomuGtdZN1PQfPMcTCuLBSB2Lbxol&id=100001455731536)



Fig. 10 Interior of projection booth of the Rialto Cinema in the mid-1960's. One of the projectionists, Jimmy McCarthy, is in the centre standing next to the projector. This photograph was provided by Mr. McCarthy's son, Sheamie.

3. OUTLINE DESCRIPTION OF FORMER RIALTO CINEMA

The former Rialto Cinema is a corner-sited multiple-bay two and three-storey building, constructed in 1946. The interior was converted to use as a hardware shop following the closure of the cinema in 1976. The front (north-east) elevation includes a rendered stepped gable to the auditorium block. The entrance block has two stepped flat roofs with set back parapet and expressed projector box (attached to gable). The cinema entrance was via a glazed central bay at street level with terrazzo entrance step and curved canopy. There are modern (post-1976) timber frame fixed glazed panels to this entrance, with a single set of glazed double doors retained to the north-west end. The entrance façade is flanked by a glazed curved bay to south-east and blank squared-bay to north-west. The flat roofs to the entrance block have an asphalt-type roof finish. There is a pitched roof of corrugated asbestos sheet to the auditorium. The building has rendered walls to the side and rear, with attached columns to (north-west and south-east) side elevations. The building includes square-headed window openings with replacement windows and concrete sills. There is an external fire escape stairs to the north-west façade, with later modifications. There are attached single-storey outbuildings to the rear (south-west) façade.

The cinema was designed with generous foyers to the ground and first floor levels. The ground floor foyer survives largely intact. The first floor foyer, with elevated views looking north-east onto Banba Squares, has been subdivided with modern lightweight stud partitions. Surviving features of interest within the interior include terrazzo floors, a curved terrazzo staircase with chrome handrail, art deco doors, and decorative art deco plasterwork to the auditorium walls and ceiling. A mezzanine floor was installed in the former auditorium post-1976 and is likely to incorporate part of the earlier viewing gallery structure of the former cinema. The yard to the side and rear includes stone rubble enclosing walls, which were constructed to enclose the grounds of the former Provincial Bank and predate the cinema building.



Fig. 10 Exterior of the former Rialto Cinema viewed from Banba Square (July 2023)

4. SIGNIFICANCE AND STATUTORY PROTECTION

4.1 Rialto Cinema

The building is a good example of mid-twentieth-century cinema architecture in Ireland. It is a relatively intact example of a single-auditorium building type that was relatively common in larger towns throughout Ireland and has become increasingly rare. The building has a Regional rating of significance on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) survey, which notes that its *'simple yet decorative style, and elements such as the canopy, curved bay and stepped gable, combine with its corner-sited position on the town square to make it an interesting contribution to the streetscape'*. The building is of architectural special interest due to the massing and clean architectural lines of the entrance block onto Banba Square and the quality and materials of the entrance foyers. The former cinema is an important component of Nenagh's architectural heritage and, together with Nenagh General Hospital (to the south of the town centre), acts as an exemplar of the influence of the Modern Movement on mid-twentieth century architectural design. The use of mass concrete to form the distinctive shapes on the exterior and the curved internal staircase of the entrance foyer are of technical special interest. The building also has social special interest as a tangible reminder of the importance of large single-auditorium cinemas as a form of entertainment from the 1940's onwards.

- The massing and strong architectural form of the entrance block, with its stepped flat roof, curved façade, projecting canopy, attic level projection booth, different shaped window openings and attached single-storey curved block (to the north-west), provide a strong presence onto Banba Square, giving external expression to the internal functions of the building. The attached block, with its industrial-style pitched roof and unadorned external facades, is a much simpler in its design but also clearly signals its function as a single-screen auditorium. The attached columns, which supported the roof trusses, were located on the outer face of the side external walls and allowed the interior of the auditorium to have uninterrupted clean lines. The modifications to the exterior of the building, including the introduction of replacement windows and the removal of glazed doors from the entrance, have led to some loss of fabric. These later changes have not significantly diluted the significance and architectural character of the former cinema, which remains largely intact.



Fig. 11 North-west (side) façade of the former Rialto Cinema (July 2023)

- The building retains a large number of internal features of interest associated with the former cinema use – including terrazzo floor finishes, the curved terrazzo staircase with steel balustrade and chrome handrails, recessed round-headed niches, and auditorium doors (surviving on first floor only) with intact art deco ironmongery. Although the construction of the post-1976 mezzanine floor has compromised the spatial character of the former auditorium, the art deco stucco decorations within this part of the building survive largely intact, providing a tangible visual link to the heyday of cinema as both entertainment and a social activity in mid-twentieth century Ireland. The later mezzanine floor, lightweight stud partitions, shop counters and fittings do not contribute to the significance of the building.



Fig. 12 Ground floor (former foyer) with curved staircase to upper floor (July 2023)



Fig. 13 The curved plaster ceiling, with art deco details, survives in an intact condition above the later (post-1976) mezzanine floor.

4.2 Site and grounds:

The enclosed yards to the (north-west) side and rear of the former cinema, finished in a mix of concrete paving and gravel, contain no features of interest. The single-storey sheds attached to the rear (south-west) gable of the auditorium block are of mid-to-late twentieth century date and do not contribute to the significance of the protected structure. There are modern lean-to structures with perspex roofs over the external passage to the south-east side of the former cinema.

The enclosing wall to the north (onto Ashe Road) is of stone rubble construction at the base with later sections of mass concrete on top. The enclosing wall to the west boundary of the yard is of stone rubble with well-crafted cut stone quoins. These stone rubble walls date from the 1860's were constructed to enclose the grounds of the former Provincial Bank.



Fig. 14 Stone rubble walls around the external yard to the west (left) and north (right) of the cinema

4.3 Setting on Banba Square

Banba Square is an important public space within the town centre of Nenagh. The architectural character of the square is defined by the diverse range of public and administrative buildings that surround it – including the early-nineteenth century ashlar limestone classical façade of the courthouse, the render façade of the former town hall (now Nenagh Arts Centre), the gabled façade of the former presbyterian church, and the former bank (now Nenagh Garda Station). The former Rialto Cinema is an important contributor to the quality and architectural diversity of this grouping of public buildings at Banba Square.

5. IMPACT OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

A full written description of the proposed development is contained in Section 1 above. The impact of the proposed development on the protected structure is described on an item-by-item basis in this section, together with mitigation measures that have been incorporated into the design to optimise the presentation of the former cinema and to minimise the impact on its significant fabric and features.

5.1 Change of use of former cinema from retail to digital and enterprise hub

The Rialto Cinema was a much-loved public building within Nenagh for much of the mid-twentieth century. The building's public use was lost following its conversion to retail use in 1976 and much of the character and spatial quality of the former cinema was compromised through the subsequent internal alterations. The proposed change of use of the former cinema to a public digital and enterprise hub, with Tipperary County Council as promoters of the project, is very welcome. This will facilitate improved public access to the interior of the building and creates an opportunity to improve and enhance the presentation of the protected structure.

Mitigation:

The proposed change of use will have a positive impact on the protected structure by re-establishing a public use for the first time since the closure of the cinema. No particular mitigation measures are required in relation to the proposed change of use. Measures to improve the presentation of the protected structure arising from this change of use are highlighted below.

5.2 Removal of post-1976 mezzanine floor and introduction of new upper floor to former auditorium, with central staircase

The post-1976 mezzanine floor structure does not contribute to the significance of the building. Its removal and the introduction of a new (first floor) mezzanine floor structure will result in an improved presentation of the former cinema auditorium. The proposed new floor structure will be entirely level with direct access from the first floor landing foyer of the former cinema. This is a significant improvement on the existing split-level mezzanine floor, which confuses the visual presentation of the former foyer. Surviving sections of the tiered former cinema gallery, located below the new floor structure, will be retained in situ. The new first floor structure will include a central staircase with open stairwell, reintroducing a limited but important visual connection between the ground floor and upper level for the first time since the cinema closed in 1976. The opening for the former cinema screen with its splayed flanking walls and curved art deco stucco string courses will be retained within the refurbished interior. The fit out of the former auditorium will retain the double-doors (from the first floor landing foyer to the gallery) together with the curved ceiling, with decorative stucco details, and decorative plasterwork to the north-east internal wall.



Fig. 15 Ground floor photograph showing post-1976 mezzanine floor to be removed and replaced. The inclusion of an open stairwell within the centre of the space will create an important visual connection between the two levels of the former auditorium.

Mitigation:

Particular care will be taken during the dismantling and removal of the existing mezzanine floor structure to identify and protect surviving components of the former cinema gallery that are currently concealed. A detailed photographic record of the interior of the former auditorium shall be compiled and lodged with the Irish Architectural Archive following the demolition of the post-1976 floor structure. All works to the interior of the former auditorium shall be carried out under the direction of an experienced conservation architect (RIAI accredited in conservation at Grade 1 or Grade 2). The detailed design of the new floor structure and central stairwell shall be finalised following a detailed review of the interior of the building by the project architect and

the conservation architect. The final design will incorporate the retained gallery structure, insofar as this is possible within the parameters of the proposed use and will protect and retain the gallery entrance doors and mid-twentieth century decorative stucco features in situ.

5.3 Introduction of new partition walls within former auditorium

The existing lightweight stud partitions, shelving and retail counter of the former hardware shop, which were installed post-1976, will be removed. New partition walls, comprising lightweight stud partitions and glass screens will be installed at ground floor and first floor level to create a series of meeting rooms and flexible workspaces within the former auditorium.

Mitigation:

The new rooms on the upper (mezzanine) level will have self-contained ceilings and the partition walls will not continue up to the curved ceiling. There will be no interface between the new partitions and the ceiling of the former cinema auditorium. This ceiling, with its decorative stucco details, will be retained without interruption as a single visual component within the building. The splayed partition walls, on either side of the opening for the former cinema screen, are to be retained as a significant feature of the interior. The partition walls have been designed to be demountable so that the fitout of the auditorium space is fully reversible without damage to the surviving fabric and features of the interior. These new partitions will be carefully scribed around any projecting decorative stucco work to avoid damage to the surviving decoration within the former cinema auditorium. All works to the interior of the former auditorium shall be carried out under the direction of an experienced conservation architect (RIAI accredited in conservation at Grade 1 or Grade 2).

5.4 Removal of external fire escape and introduction of single-storey extension to north-west façade

The existing external fire escape staircase on the north-west façade of the former cinema is to be removed. A new single-storey extension with glazed external walls and flat roof will be added to the north-west façade, providing additional floor area for the flexible workspaces within the proposed digital and enterprise hub. The infill panels of masonry will be removed between the structural columns on the north-west external wall at ground floor level (to provide access to the proposed extension).



Fig. 16 External fire escape stairs on north-west façade of former cinema – proposed for removal

The staircase structure dates from the original construction of the building in 1946, with some later modifications. The demolition of this staircase will involve the loss of a secondary component of the original design. This removal is required to facilitate the proposed extension and will not significantly impact on the form, character and architectural integrity of the former cinema as a whole. The design of the proposed new extension is sympathetic to the established character and scale of the existing building. This extension is regarded as a modest intervention, with a scale and massing that is appropriate to the established architectural character of the protected structure.

Mitigation:

A detailed photographic record of the external staircase is to be lodged with the Irish Architectural Archive prior to the commencement of demolition work. The demolition of the staircase is to be carried out by operatives with experience of similar work within close proximity to a protected structure. All demolition work within 500mm of the retained structure of the building is to be carried out using hand tools only.

5.5 Removal of infill panels and introduction of glazing between attached columns on north-west and south-east (side) facades

The infill panels of masonry will be removed between the structural columns on the north-west and south-east external walls. New panels of glazing will be introduced between the structural columns on the external walls, which are to be retained. The existing blank masonry panels are a secondary architectural component of the former cinema building, reflecting the inward-looking character of the former cinema use and the need to limit natural light to the auditorium. The removal of the existing masonry is a significant modification to the building but is required to facilitate the re-use of the auditorium as an attractive and flexible working environment.



Fig. 17 Detail of infill panel above external fire escape stairs on north-west façade of former cinema

Mitigation:

The visual impact of the removal of the infill panels is mitigated by the retention of the attached columns, which are an important architectural feature on the side facades of the building. A detailed photographic record of the exterior of the building is to be lodged with the Irish Architectural Archive prior to the commencement of demolition work. The demolition of the staircase will be undertaken by operatives with experience of similar work within close proximity to a protected structure and is to be carried out using hand tools only.

5.6 New first floor extension to the south elevation of the former Rialto Cinema building including new glazed openings at ground and first floor

The rendered blockwork rear (south-west) façade of the annexe to the rear (south-west) of the auditorium block is to be removed and replaced with a new façade of metal frame double-glazed panels with vertical fins of reconstituted stone. As part of the remodelling of this south-west annex, the single-storey structure in the west corner of the building, to the rear of the former cinema screen (now removed), is to be demolished and rebuilt with a new extension at first floor level. The flat roof over the lower two-storey structure in the south-east corner of the annex is to be raised to create a single roof level. The existing south-west (rear) façade comprises a blank wall with dashed render finish and roofs at differing heights. This back-of-house annex is of limited significance and does not contribute to the architectural character and quality of the protected structure. The proposed remodelling of the rear annex, to include a modest first floor extension, will not have a significant impact on the primary facades of the building, as viewed from Banba Square and Ashe Road.



Fig. 18 Detail of rear annex behind (south-west) gable wall of auditorium block. This annex is to be extended and remodelled.

Mitigation:

A detailed photographic record of the exterior of the building is to be lodged with the Irish Architectural Archive prior to the commencement of demolition work. The demolition of the staircase is to be carried out by operatives with experience of similar work within close proximity to a protected structure. All demolition work within 500mm of the retained structure of the building is to be carried out using hand tools only. Particular care is to be taken to avoid damage to the in-situ concrete eaves projection with curved end, which is adjacent to the proposed west corner extension.

5.7 Works to interior of entrance block, including new staircase and lift, and associated alterations

The existing curved public staircase with terrazzo finish, which connected the ground floor foyer to the first floor of the former cinema, is to be retained and will remain in use. New connecting doors are to be introduced from the foyer to the ground floor of the former cinema auditorium. A new lift and fire escape staircase is to be introduced at the north-west end of the entrance block, connecting the main entrance foyer to the new

first floor (gallery level of the former cinema) and the second floor, which contained the projection booth of the former cinema. This internal remodelling will require the removal of an existing staircase (from the first floor landing to the former projection booth) together with a section of the first floor landing (former upper level foyer) and the former ladies' toilets at second floor level. The existing (post-1976) lightweight stud partitions on the first floor landing will be removed to create an open plan lecture and exhibition space.

The curved staircase (fig. 19) is an important feature of the former cinema, and its retention will have a positive impact on the presentation of the protected structure. The lightweight partitions at first floor level are of no significance and obscure the presentation of the original foyer to the upper gallery of the former cinema. The reinstatement of this landing as an open plan lecture and exhibition space is very welcome and will have a positive impact on the presentation of the interior of the protected structure. The reinstated open plan landing will provide public views from the upper floor of the former cinema across Banba Square towards Nenagh Castle for the first time since the Rialto Cinema closed in 1976. The service staircase to the projection booth is of mass concrete construction (fig. 20). This staircase provides an interesting insight into the spatial and operational layout of the former cinema but is of limited architectural significance in its own right. This service staircase is too steep and too narrow to meet the fire safety requirements for the proposed new public access to the second floor of the entrance block. The demolition of this staircase will have a moderate impact on the protected structure and is unavoidable if the building is to be brought fully back into use.



Fig. 19 Curved staircase to first floor foyer – to be retained



Fig. 20 Service staircase to second floor (projection booth and ladies' toilets) to be removed to facilitate new fire escape staircase.

Mitigation:

A detailed photographic record of the interior of the building is to be lodged with the Irish Architectural Archive prior to the commencement of demolition work. The demolition of the staircase is to be carried out by operatives with experience of similar work within a protected structure and is to be carried out using hand tools only. Particular care is to be taken to minimise damage to surviving terrazzo floor finishes within the building.

As part of the works, damaged areas of terrazzo on the floors and curved staircase will be repaired by a terrazzo

specialist under the direction of the project conservation architect. The steel balustrade and chrome hand rail will be protected during the works and retained, with replacement balustrade and chrome handrail to be introduced where missing. The curved niche off the proposed new staircase (fig. 21) will be retained in situ. A detailed drawing and written specification for the conservation and refurbishment of the foyer will be submitted to the planning authority for review and agreement prior to the commencement of work in this part of the building, to include details on the presentation of the single-storey curved annex, formerly housing the ticket office and refreshment counter of the Rialto Cinema.



Fig. 21 Curved bow at north-west end of the ground floor foyer. This area previously housed the ticket office and refreshments stall of the former Rialto Cinema.

5.8 Replacement of windows and doors

The uPVC frame double-glazed windows to the existing window openings throughout the former cinema, which were installed in the late-1990's/early-2000's, are to be removed and replaced with new metal frame double-glazed windows. The existing glazed double doors and timber frame fixed glazed panels to the main entrance (off Banba Square) are to be removed and replaced with outward opening double doors.

The existing windows are modern replacements and have a negative visual impact on the presentation of the protected structure. The removal of these inappropriate windows and their replacement with metal frame windows that are closer in design to the original steel frame windows of the Rialto Cinema is very welcome and will have a positive impact on the presentation of the protected structure.

The existing glazed double doors and timber frame fixed glazed panels to the main entrance date from post-1976. These fixed panels of glass disrupt the physical connection between the foyer and Banba Square, which was an important component of the original design of the Rialto Cinema. The reintroduction of outward opening doors within the former entrance will reinstate this connection and will have a positive impact on the presentation of the protected structure as an important public building within the town centre.

Mitigation:

The curved brass handrails on the inside and outside of the existing entrance doors (fig. 23) are high quality examples of mid-twentieth century ironmongery and appear to have been reused from the earlier (original) entrance doors to the former Rialto Cinema. These handles will be salvaged and re-used in a location to be agreed with the project conservation architect and the planning authority. The proposed replacement windows shall have slender metal frames to reflect the design and proportions of the earlier mid-twentieth century steel frame windows of the former cinema. A detailed door and window schedule is to be prepared, with input from the project conservation architect, and submitted to the planning authority for review and agreement before these components are placed on order.



Fig. 22 Modern uPVC frame double glazed windows on curved staircase, with view of Nenagh Castle. These windows are to be replaced with new slender frame metal windows.



Fig. 23 Curved brass pull handles on timber double doors at entrance to former Rialto Cinema

5.9 Replacement of roof finish to auditorium block

The existing pitched roof of the auditorium block comprises corrugated asbestos sheeting dating from the mid-twentieth century. The existing roof covering is to be removed and replaced with profiled metal cladding. Asbestos sheet was widely used in industrial buildings throughout the mid-twentieth century and was also commonly used as a roofing material on dance halls and cinema auditoria. Asbestos sheeting is now recognised as a potentially hazardous material and is no longer used on new roofing.

The replacement of the existing roof sheets with new profiled metal sheets will have a minimal visual impact on the presentation of the former cinema. It will be important that the profile and colour of the new roofing is selected to be sympathetic to the character of the protected structure.

Mitigation:

The in-situ concrete projecting eaves (with curved end) is to be retained and protected. Detailed design drawings for the roof are to be presented to the planning authority, together with a sample of the proposed new roof sheet, for review and agreement before roofing materials for the auditorium block are placed on order.



Fig. 24 Detail of corrugated asbestos roof sheeting on south-west gable of auditorium block. The cast concrete projecting eaves is an important feature of the building, to be protected and retained as part of the work.

5.10 Energy efficiency improvements

The attic void above the auditorium is to be upgraded with new quilt insulation. The retained flat roofs of the entrance block are to be upgraded to incorporate insulation to modern standards. The proposed introduction of high-quality double-glazing throughout the building will contribute to a significantly improved thermal performance to the building.

Mitigation:

The approach to the thermal upgrading of the building will be to optimise the energy efficiency of the building without negatively impacting the character, fabric or significant architectural features of the protected structure. A detailed energy efficiency strategy for the building is to be prepared, with input from the project conservation architect, and submitted to the planning authority for review and agreement before this work commences.

5.11 Demolition of boundary walls to the north, south and (part) south-east of the application site

The application includes for the development of the lands to the south and west of the former Rialto Cinema for residential use with public realm and car parking. A new landscaped public space with tree planting is proposed to the north-west side of the protected structure, opening onto Ashe Road. This will require the demolition of boundary walls to the north, south and (part) south-east of the application site.

The existing yard to the north-west (side) of the former cinema was used for the storage of materials associated with the previous hardware shop and has no significant features. The new public space off Ashe

Road will have a positive impact both on the presentation of the protected structure and wider streetscape of Ashe Road and Banba Square. This proposal will require the removal of the stone rubble boundary walls around the yard, which date from the construction of the former Provincial Bank in 1864. The nineteenth century north boundary wall (fig. 25), which has been increased in height with mass concrete, formed the corner of Ashe Road and Banba Square when the town centre of Nenagh expanded northwards towards the courthouse in the mid-nineteenth century. The removal of this stone rubble wall will result in the loss of a feature of local historical interest.



Fig. 25 Stone rubble boundary wall to north of cinema, with gate onto Ashe Road. The portico of Nenagh Courthouse is visible in the background.

Mitigation:

The detailed landscaping design will delineate the line of the demolished walls using stone paving of local limestone, to match the stone used in the construction of the boundary walls. The opportunity to retain small sections of the north-west boundary wall as a public bench will be explored as part of this detailed design. Detailed drawings of the proposed landscaping design are to be prepared, with input from the project conservation architect, and submitted to the planning authority for review and agreement before this work commences.



Fig. 26 Exterior of former cinema, viewed from Ashe Road, with boundary wall in foreground

5.12 Demolition of the single storey attached outbuildings to the former Rialto Cinema building

The proposed development includes for the demolition of the single-storey outbuildings that are attached to the rear (south-west) and side (south-east) of the former Rialto Cinema. The rear outbuildings are of blockwork and mass concrete construction. These outbuildings (fig. 27) are not in use and are of no obvious architectural significance. The lean-to roofs are in poor repair. The demolitions will include the removal of the lightweight perspex roof (fig. 28) over the fire escape passage on the south-east side of the former cinema. These proposed demolitions will not involve the loss of fabric that contributes to the significance of the former Rialto Cinema.

Mitigation:

A detailed photographic record of the interior of the building, to include the attached outbuildings, is to be lodged with the Irish Architectural Archive prior to the commencement of demolition work.



Fig. 27 Outbuildings attached to south-west (rear) gable of auditorium block. These structures are to be demolished.



Fig. 28 Perspex roof over south-east fire escape passage. This lightweight roof is to be removed.

6. CONCLUSION

The proposed development creates an important and welcome opportunity to introduce an appropriate sustainable long-term use to the former Rialto Cinema. The proposed use, as a digital and enterprise hub, will allow improved public access to the interior of the building for the first time in almost fifty years. Key internal features, including the curved staircase, the terrazzo flooring, and the decorative ceiling of the former auditorium, will be retained as important components of the refurbished building, providing a strong visual link to the building's past. The proposed development includes for the removal of later interventions associated with the (post-1976) hardware retail use. This will improve the presentation of the building, particularly within the former public foyers of the entrance block. The proposed new use will require some alterations that will impact on the fabric and character of the protected structure, as described in Section 5 of this report. These interventions are proportionate and necessary to achieve the proposed new use and their impact will be minimised by the adoption of the mitigation measures outlined in this report.

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APPENDIX A

PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF FORMER RIALTO CINEMA

Note: All photographs were taken by the author during an inspection of the building and site on 11th July 2023

EXTERIOR OF FORMER RIALTO CINEMA



A1: View from Banba Square looking west towards front façade of former Rialto Cinema



A2: Former Rialto Cinema, viewed from grounds of Nenagh Courthouse, to north



A3: East corner of former Rialto Cinema – the curved boundary wall of Nenagh Garda Station (formerly the Provincial Bank) echoes the curve of the cantilevered canopy and external wall of the main staircase



A4: Entrance to former cinema from Banba Square



A5: Terrazzo Step at entrance to former cinema



A6: Brass pull handle on entrance door



A7: Rear (south-west) façade of former cinema, viewed from yard to south.



A8: Detail of north-west (side) façade of former Rialto Cinema



A9: Curved bow of former ticket office at north corner of former cinema



A10: Entrance to ladies' toilet off south-east external passage



A11: External passage on south-east side of former cinema



A12: North-east façade of projection room (second floor level) with set back external terrace overlooking Banba Square

INTERIOR OF FORMER RIALTO CINEMA



A13: Interior of ground floor foyer (looking north)



A14: Glazed screen within former entrance to foyer from Banba Square



A15: Interior of ground floor retail space (former auditorium of Rialto Cinema, looking east towards foyer and entrance)



A16: Ground floor retail space (former auditorium) with chamfered wall on left side of opening for cinema screen



A17: Ground floor of former auditorium with support columns for later (post-1976) mezzanine floor



A18: Curved staircase



A19: Curved staircase



A20: Niche off curved staircase



A21: First floor landing (formerly the foyer to the gallery of the Rialto Cinema)



A22: Curved staircase & first floor landing



A23: Curved external wall of main staircase



A24: First floor landing



A25: View from raised mezzanine floor towards rear (north-east) of former cinema gallery



A26: Double doors from former gallery to first floor landing



A27: 1940's ironmongery on double doors of former gallery



A28: Decorative plaster detail on chamfered wall on left of former cinema screen



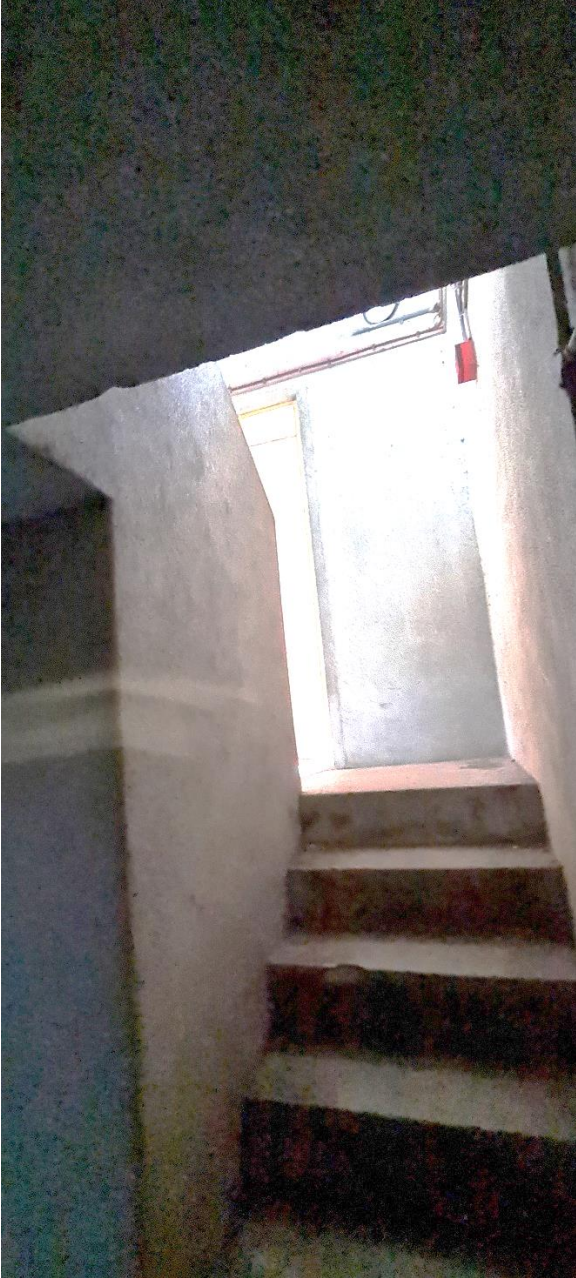
A29: Detail of decorative plaster ceiling of former cinema auditorium



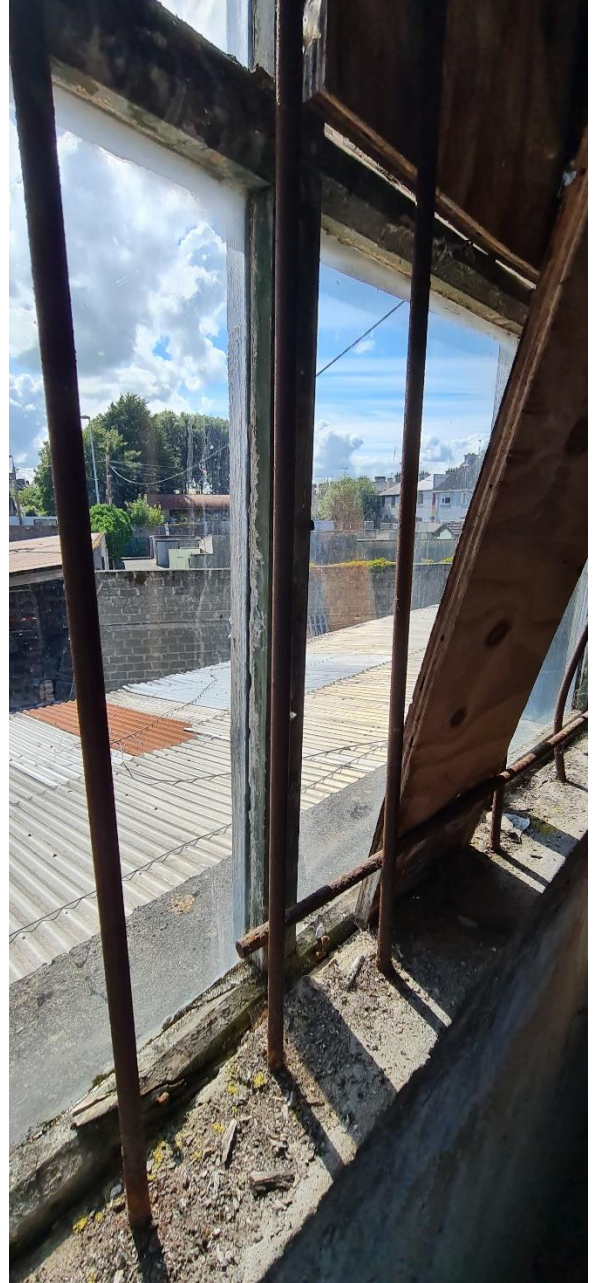
A30: Service staircase from first floor (public landing) to projection booth



A31: Second floor – interior of former projection booth



A32: Rear staircase in south corner of building



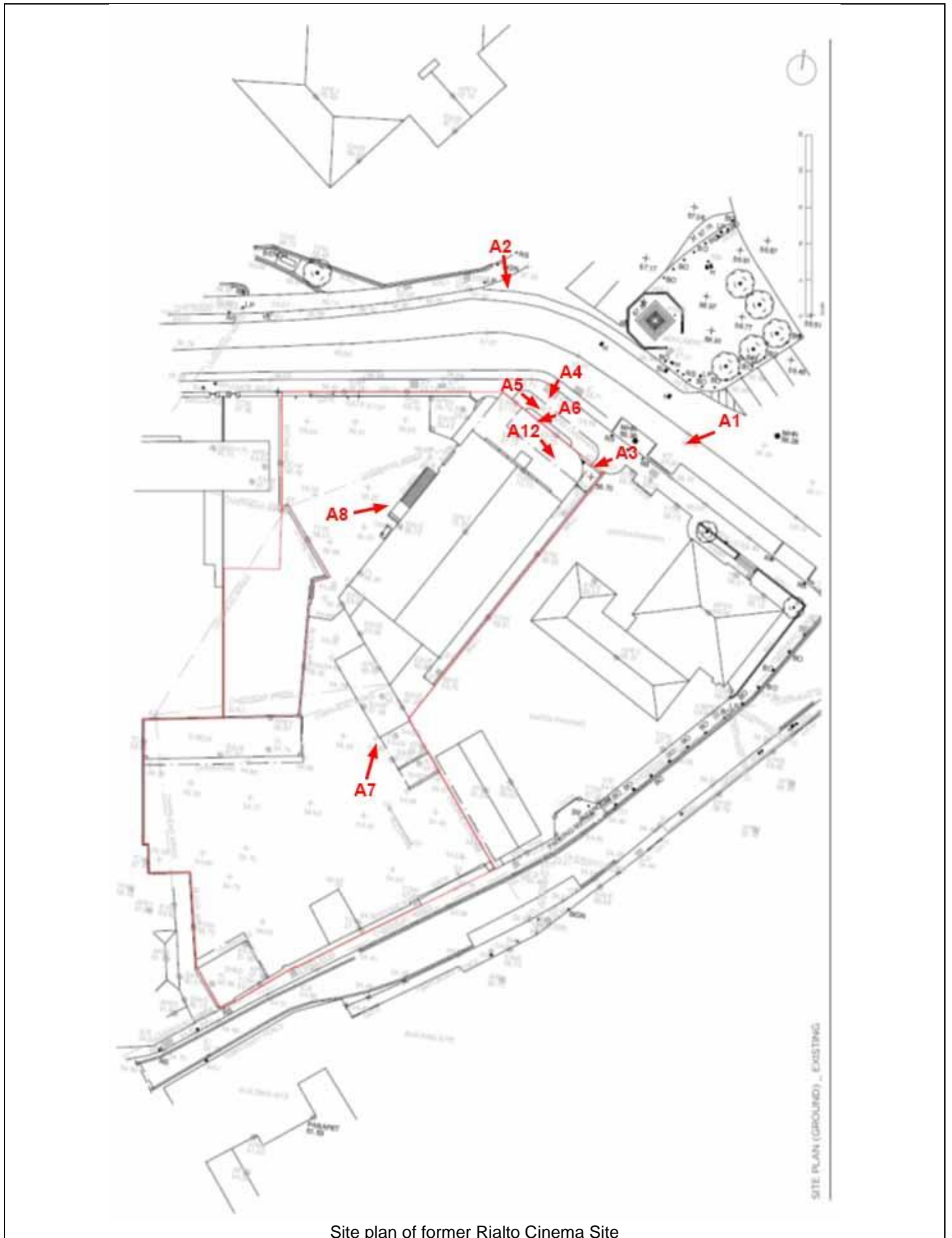
A33: Detail of first floor window in south corner of building

APPENDIX B

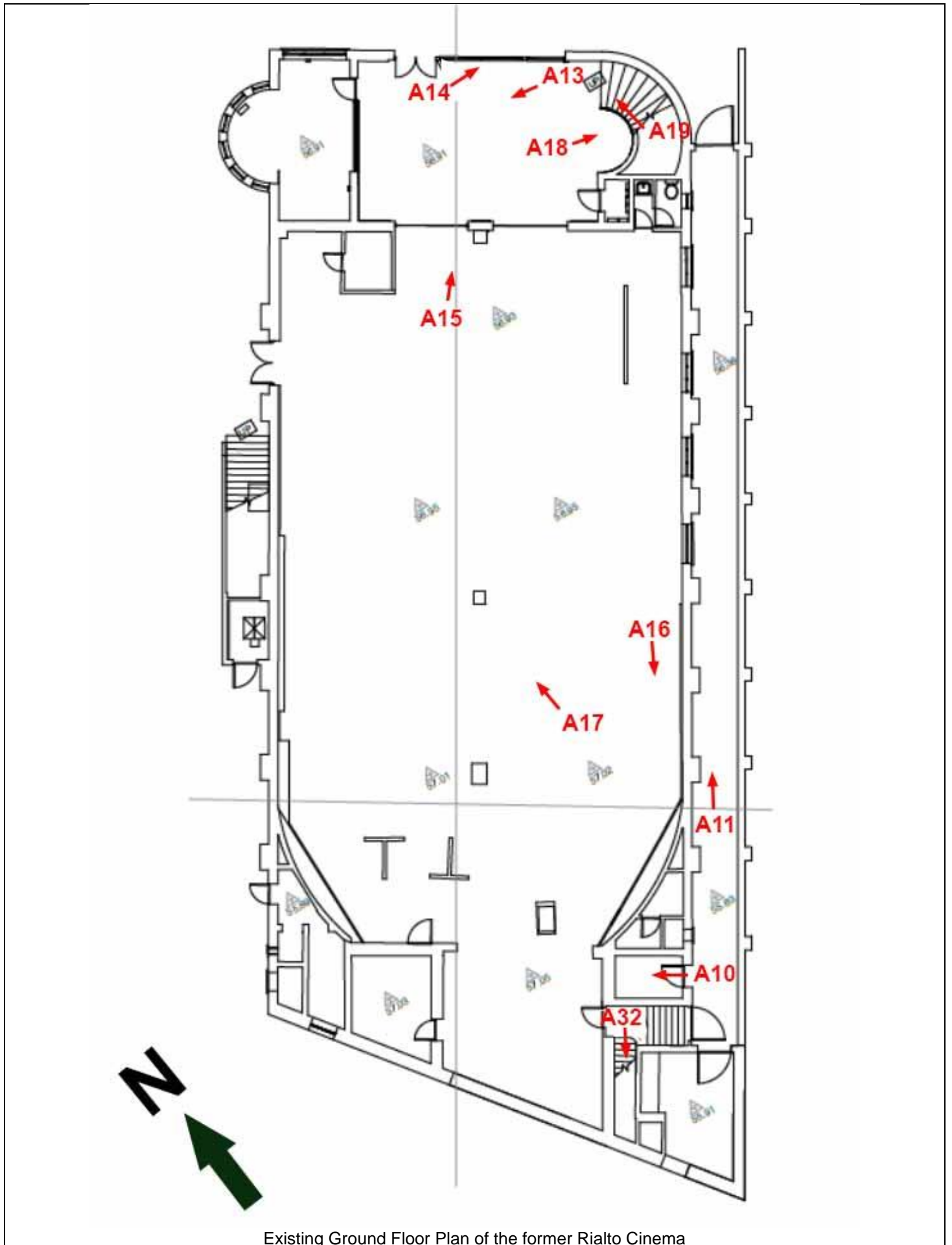
EXISTING SURVEY PLANS OF FORMER RIALTO CINEMA

Note:

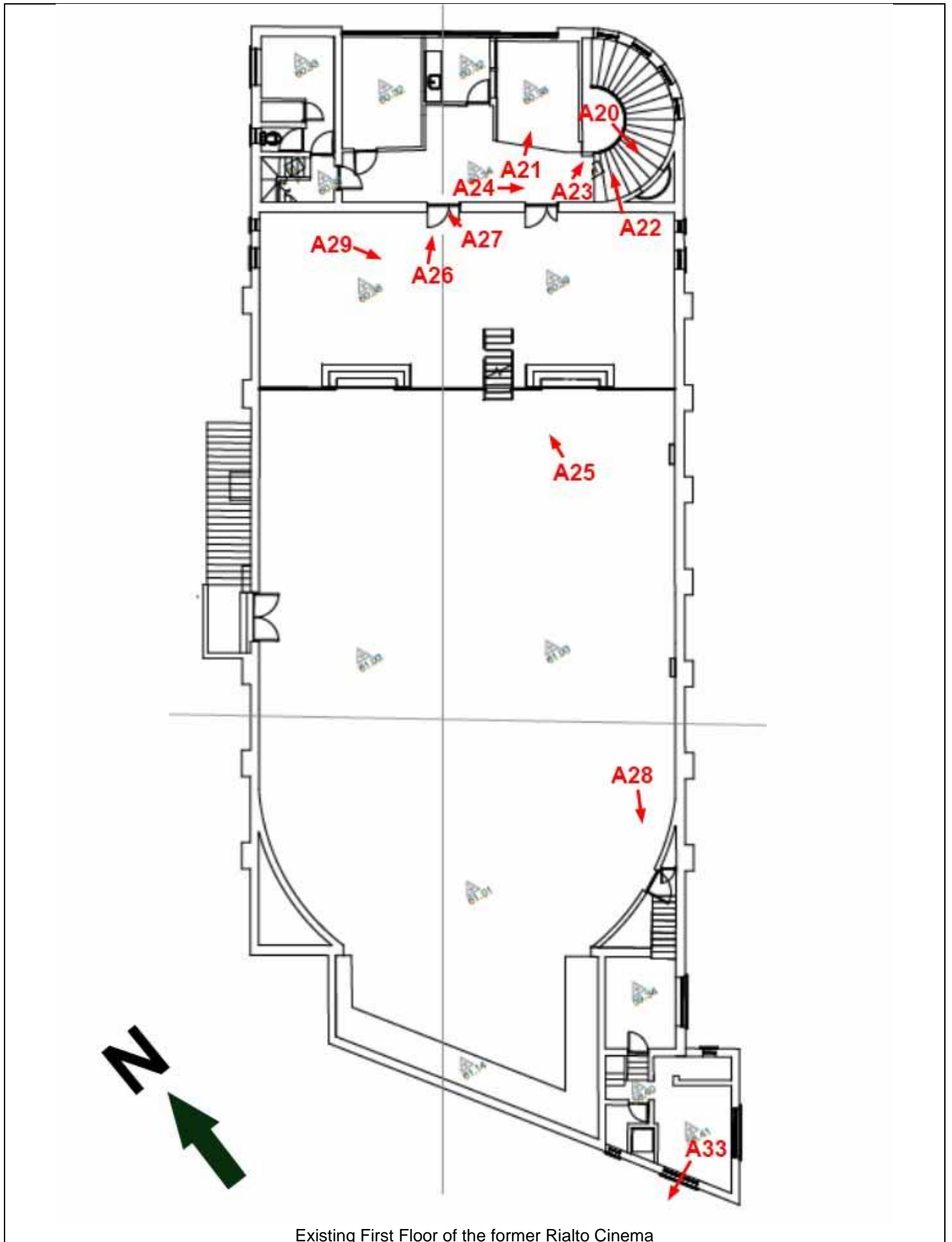
The existing survey plans within Appendix B have been adapted from the planning application drawings. The drawings have been annotated to show the viewpoint for all photographs contained in Appendix A.



Site plan of former Rialto Cinema Site



Existing Ground Floor Plan of the former Rialto Cinema



Existing First Floor of the former Rialto Cinema