

Appendix F: Theatre Consultant's Report

THE HARLINGTON

RIBA STAGE 1 – FEASIBILITY REPORT

The Harlington (Fleet, UK)

Report
June 2025

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Executive Summary

This feasibility report outlines the work undertaken by Charcoalblue for the redevelopment of The Harlington, Fleet.

We have provided proposals for each of the following areas of design,

- Venue Design
- Stage Engineering systems
- Stagelighting and Audiovisual systems
- Acoustics (please see separate report)

1. INTRODUCTION

Charcoalblue were engaged by Burrell Foley Fisher (BFF) architects to assist in the development of The Harlington with specific focus on the technical and operational aspects of the venue.

We have worked in conjunction with BFF to develop two primary options that provide improved facilities for both audience and technical staff and bring the main venue to modern standards, ensuring it is suitable for artists and productions for many years to come.

To assist in the operation of the venue, we have proposed a retractable seating system for both options. This will allow for greater use of the venue with the ability to quickly adapt between a fully seated configuration to a flat floor format. This will remove the need to manually set out seating and reduce the number of crew required to undertake this.

We have worked with Skelly and Couch, the projects services engineers, to develop a complete replacement of the existing stagelighting and audiovisual infrastructure thus enabling the venue to bring their systems up to modern safety and operational standards. We anticipate that a large quantity of the existing equipment will be able to be utilised but also anticipate modern equipment will need to be integrated into the venue in the future.

For the overhead rigging systems, we have allowed for a replacement of the overstage rigging elements. This will comprise of motorised suspension systems, bringing a safer and faster method of rigging to the venue. Over the auditorium, we have proposed a series of rigging 'strong points' for the suspension of chain hoists for a variety of rigging modes along with motorised bars for suspension of lighting and audiovisual equipment.



The Harlington, Fleet. Current exterior

2. VENUE DESIGN

2.1. Existing Venue

The Harlington is a performances venue and community space, hosting a wide range of events and productions each year: from touring music acts, stand-up comedy, bingo and a yearly pantomime, to local community events such as aerobics, film society screenings, dance competitions, art society talks and a large variety of lectures for all ages throughout the year.

Although successful as a venue, customer and staff feedback highlights lack of seating comfort, suboptimal sightlines, costly and time-consuming turnaround times between changing different seating formats, lack of and quality of dressing rooms, and below par accessibility to areas such as stage and control room.

Other issues identified during workshops relate to inadequate bar facilities during live gigs and stand-up comedy events. Feedback noted that a bar available inside the performance space would be desirable.

2.2. Design Brief

For this Feasibility Study we were tasked with assisting Burrell Foley Fischer in providing three different design options on how the Harlington could be redeveloped in the future: Option 1 – a baseline option bringing the venue up to compliance, Option 2 – alterations to the venue that would significantly improve the facilities for staff and customers, Option 3 – same as Option 2 with the addition of a new second performance space. We have set out the approach to the three options below.

Note: All layouts shown in the following sections are extracts from BFF drawings.

2.3. Option 1

2.3.1. OUTLINE PROPOSAL

Option 1 is a baseline version – achieved with a simple approach to refurbishment. For the venue itself this means presenting an option that would work with three primary formats: Flat floor gigs, theatre style seated on a retractable rake and cabaret style seated around tables. All options would need to improve access for users (visitors, audience members, performers and staff) in line with Part M of the Building Regulations.

2.3.2. RETRACTABLE SEATING OPTION

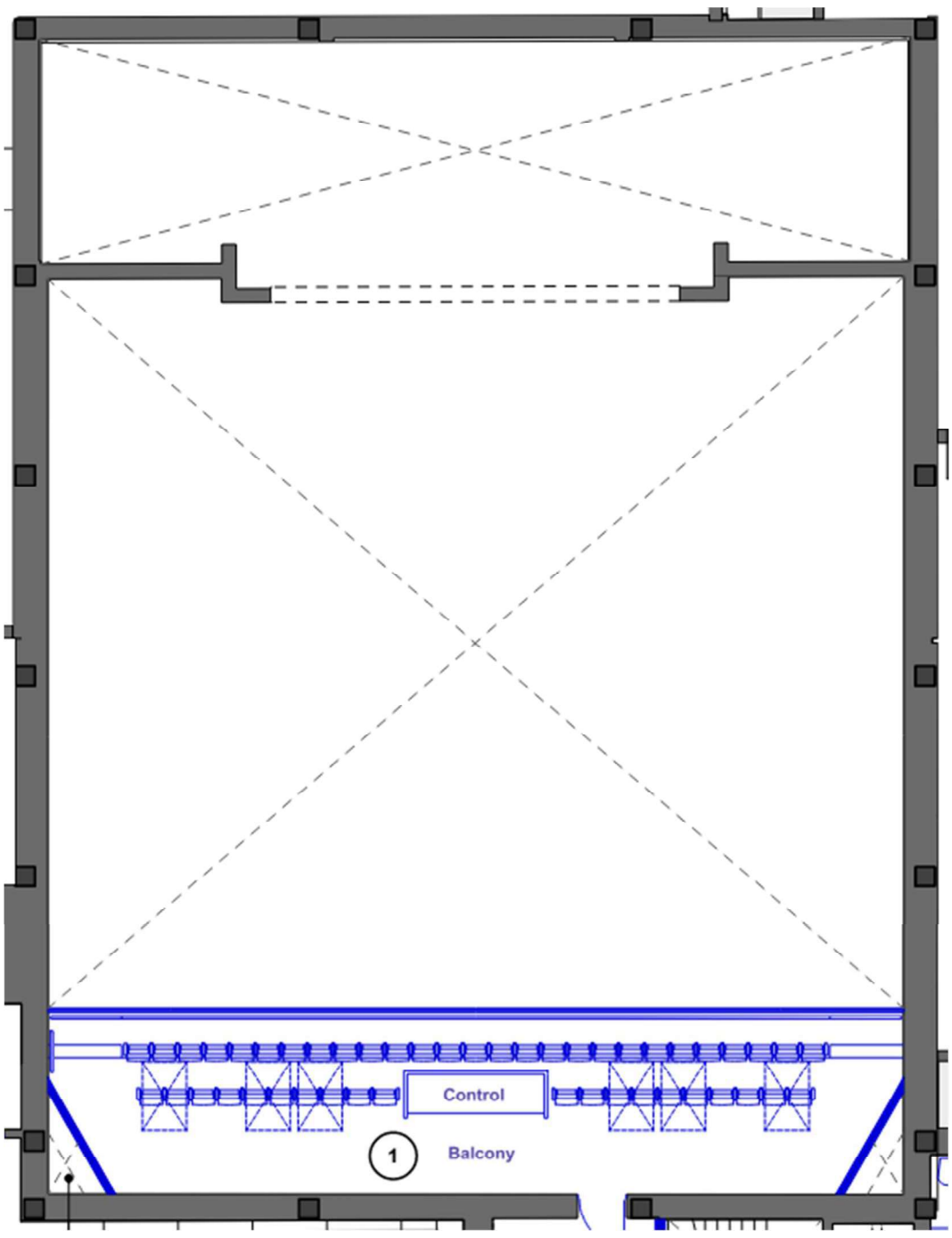
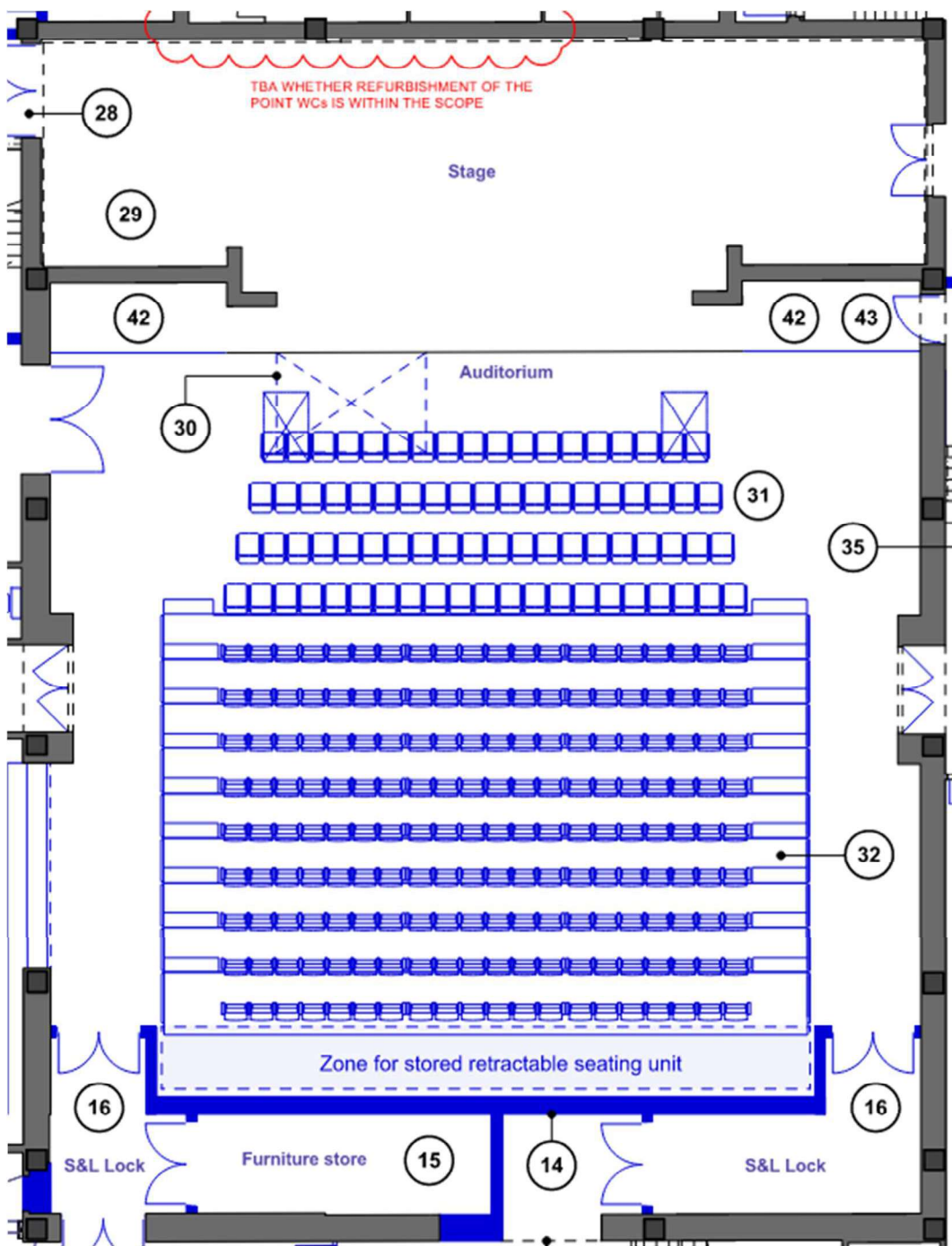
Option 1 contains a simple 9 row retractable seating unit with 20 seats in each row. There is an opportunity to connect the bank of seating to the first floor balcony for entrance and egress, which should help access to first floor toilets and reduce the burden on the ground floor facilities.

When the unit is fully retracted there is space for four rows of interlocked seating at the front.

RETRACTABLE SEATING FORMAT CAPACITY

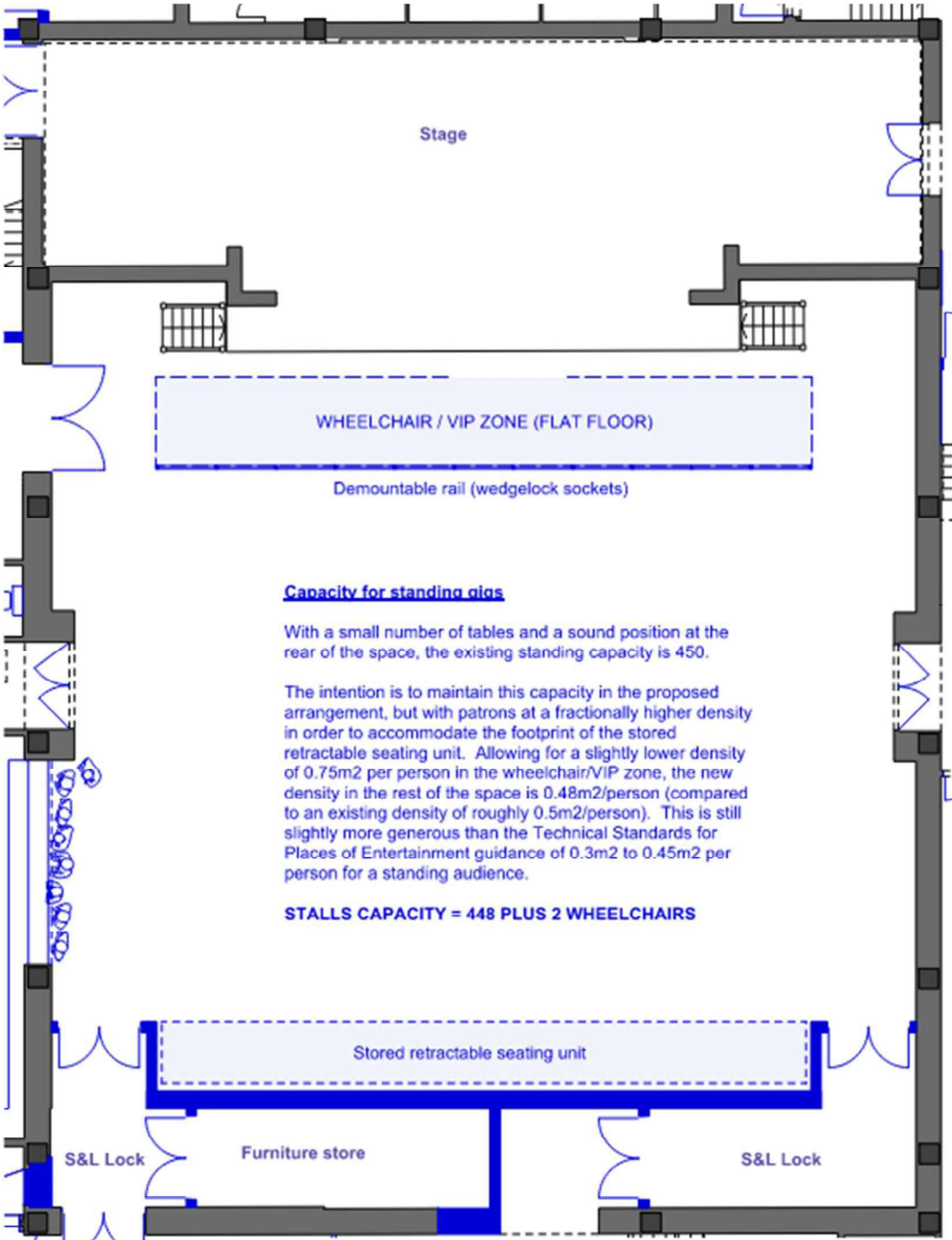
Retractable seating unit	180
Flat floor interlocking seating	78*
Balcony	47*
Total: 305*	

*Wheelchair positions can be provided on the flat floor area or on the balcony in several different configurations. The total seat number would be reduced by 8-12 depending on the format chosen



2.3.3. FLAT FLOOR GIGS

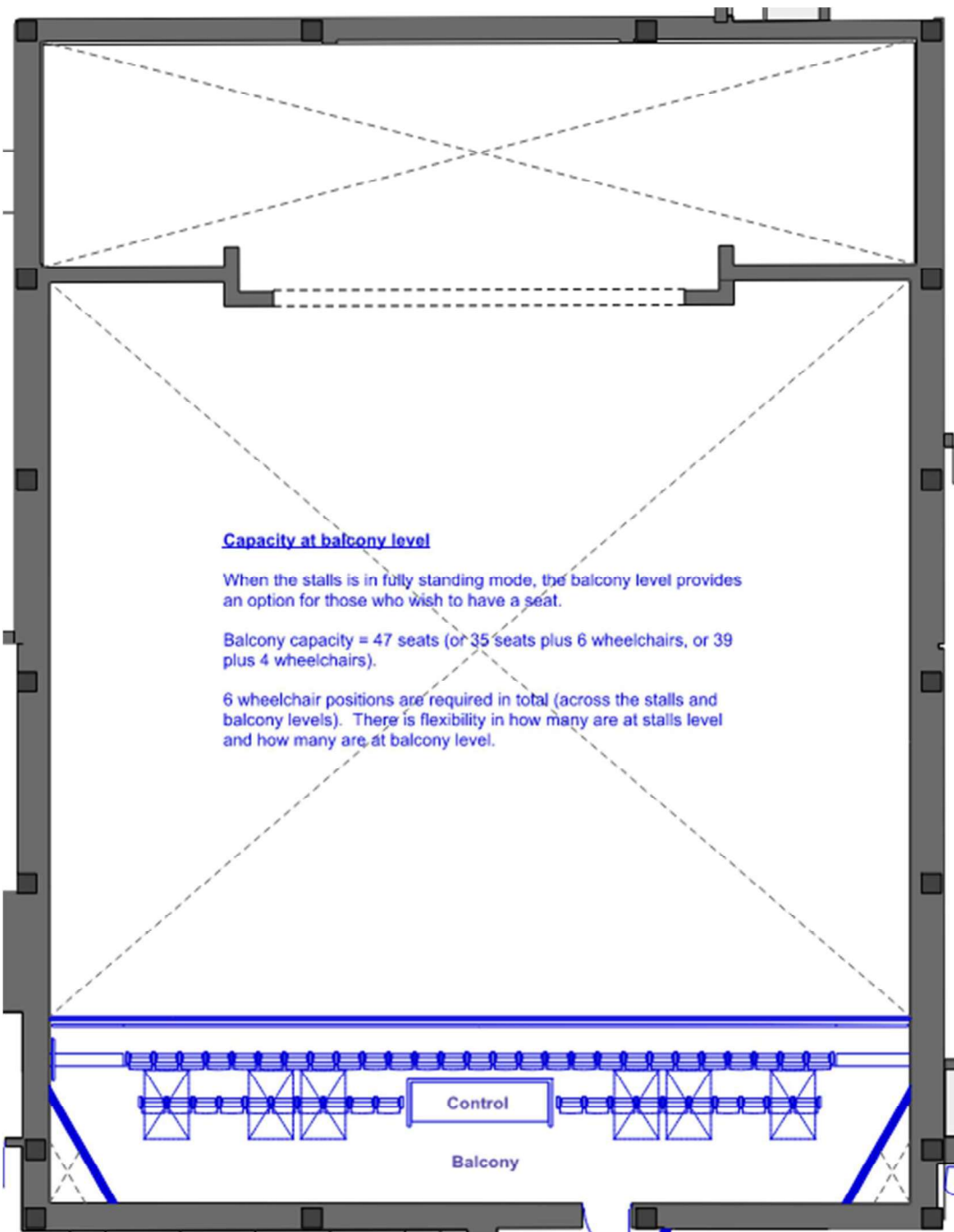
It is important to the client to maximise the capacity of the venue for concerts with a predominantly standing audience.



FLAT FLOOR GIG FORMAT CAPACITY

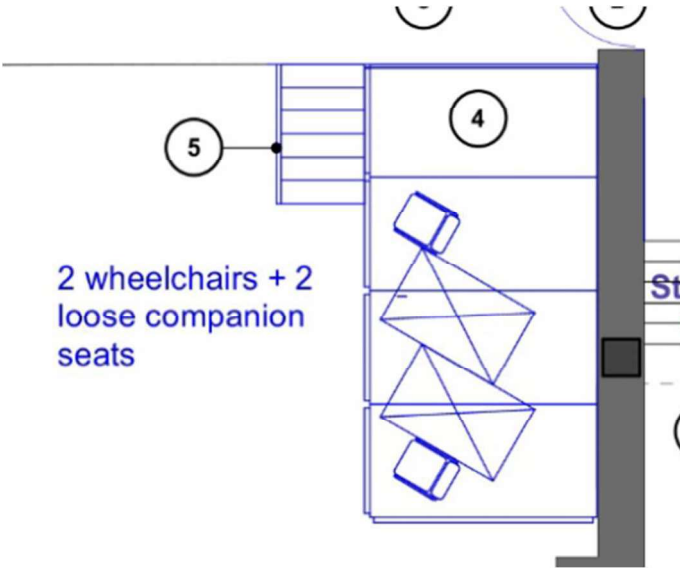
Stalls capacity	448*
Balcony	47*
Total: 495*	

*Wheelchair positions can be provided on the flat floor area on the raised platform plinth or on the balcony in several different configurations. The total seat number would be reduced by 8-12 depending on the format chosen



2.3.4. ACCESS

We have developed a sketch for a temporary wheelchair raised platform at the side of the auditorium that could be used for flat floor gigs. This would be level with the stage and accessed via a stair platform lift located in the corridor and a new door leading on to the forestage and on to the platform.



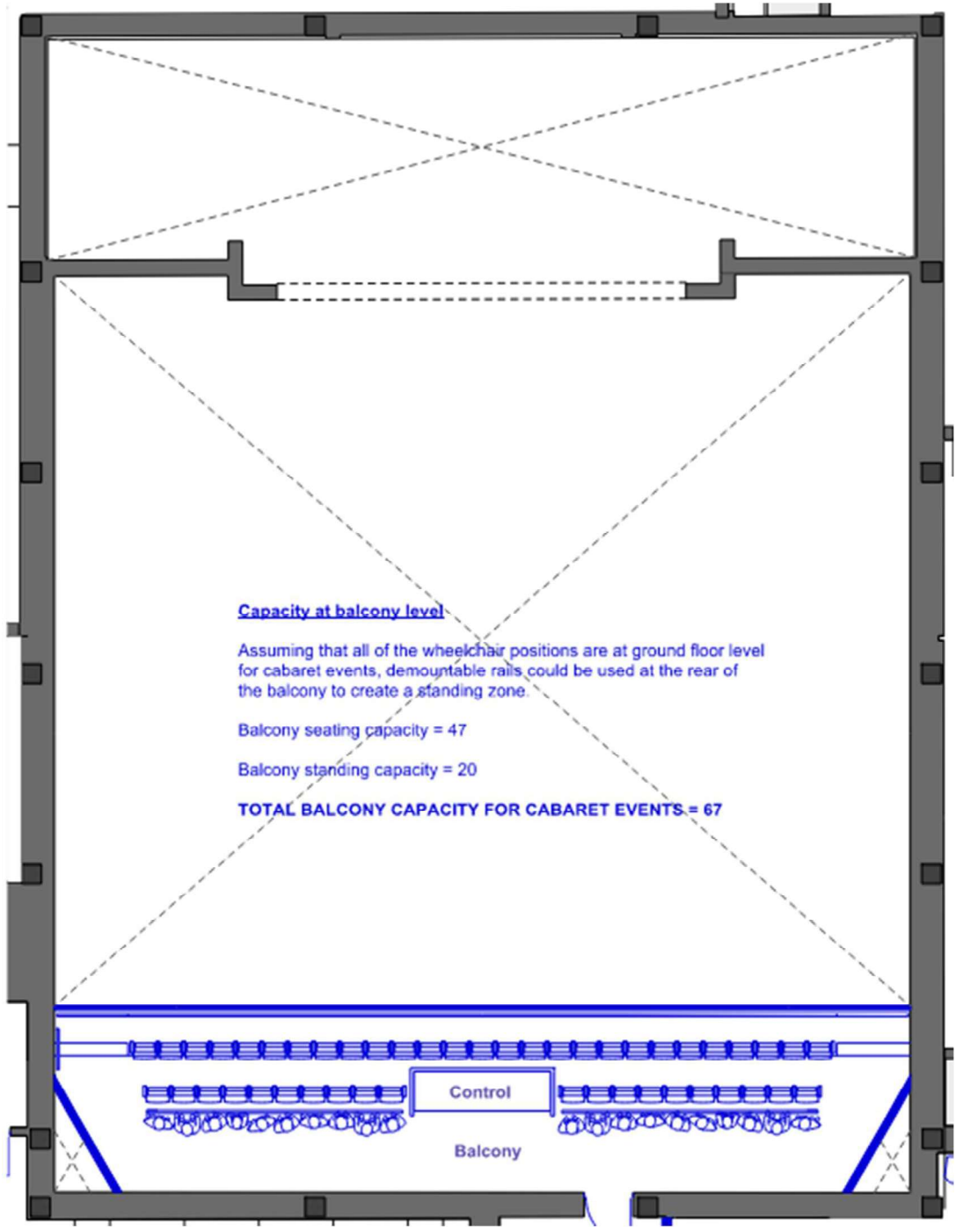
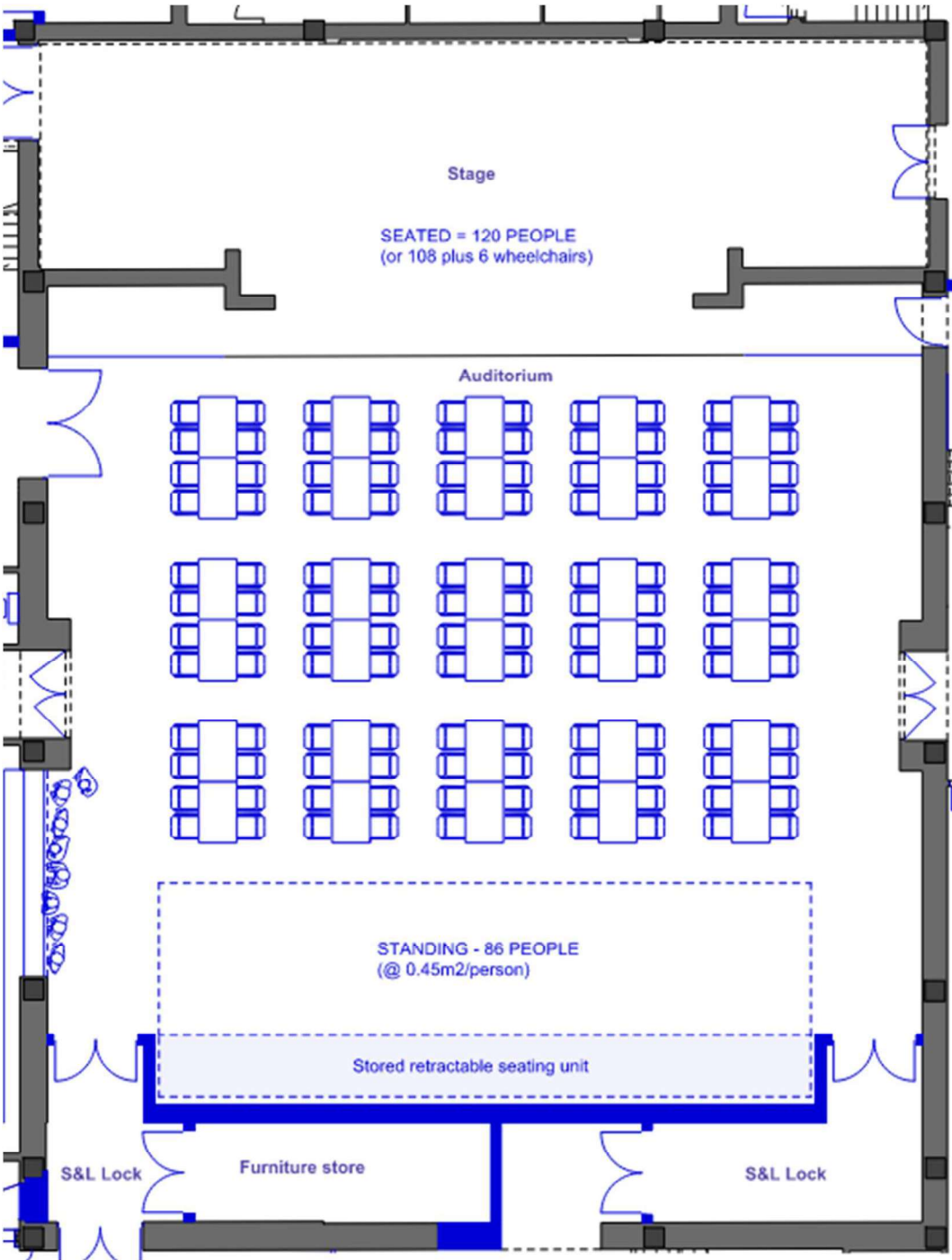
2.3.5. CABARET SEATING

The current cabaret layout caters for patrons seated around tables, and standing. The format will have added seating opportunities on the balcony.

CABARET SEATING FORMAT CAPACITY

Seated (at tables)	120*
Standing (ground floor)	86
Seated (balcony)	47*
Standing (balcony)	20
Total: 273*	

* 6 wheelchair positions can be provided on the flat floor or on the balcony in several different configurations. The total seat number would be reduced by 8-12 depending on the format chosen

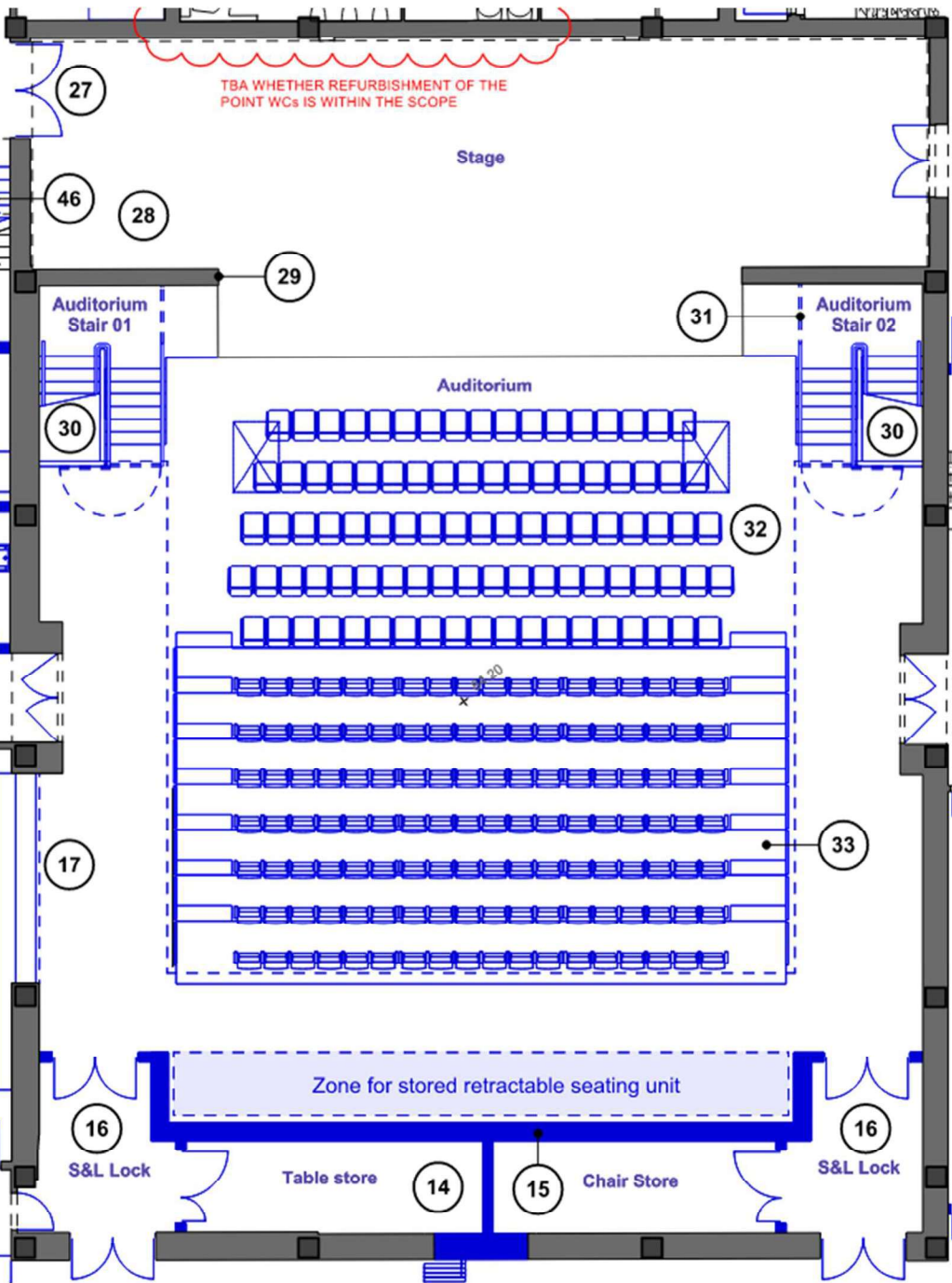


2.4. Option 2

2.4.1. OUTLINE PROPOSAL

The major difference between Options 1 and 2 is development of a more significant balcony, with side slips containing additional seating to increase the capacity as much as possible.

Visually the side balconies help to bring the already wide main space in, making it more intimate and improving connection between performer and audience. With two proposed stairs at the end of the slips, it allows for a greater connection between the two stories and better access to the ground floor bar from the balcony for events when this is open.



2.4.2. RETRACTABLE SEATING

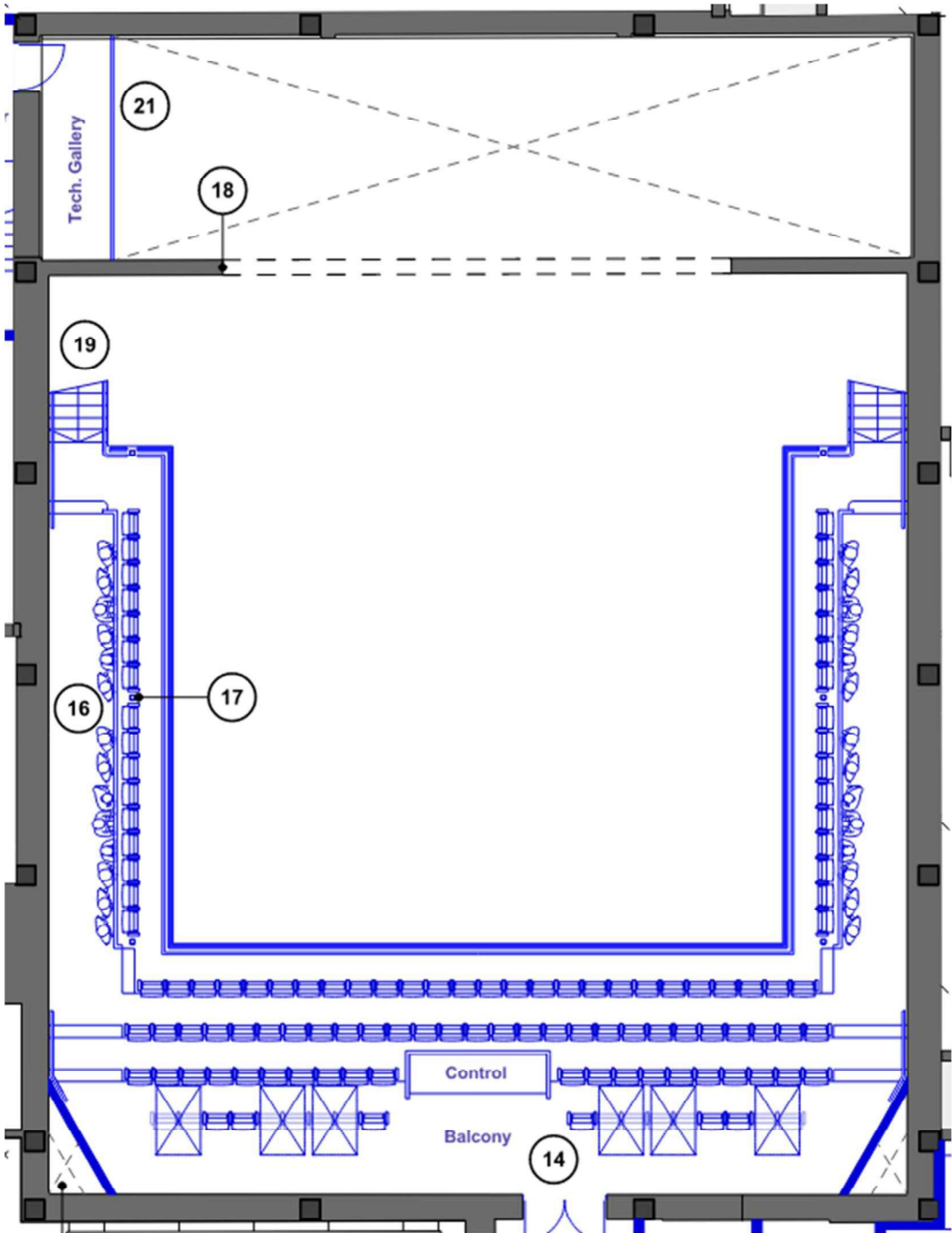
The retractable seating unit for Option 2 is smaller than in option 1 with 7 rows and 18 seats in each row. This is to allow for the larger balcony and side slips. Just as in option 1 there is an opportunity to connect the bank of seating to the first floor balcony for entrance and egress, which should help access to first floor toilets and reduce the burden on the ground floor facilities.

When the unit is fully retracted there is space for five rows of interlocked seating with a capacity of 93 seats or 89 seats with two wheelchair positions.

RETRACTABLE SEATING FORMAT CAPACITY

Retractable seating unit	126
Flat floor interlocking seating	93*
Balcony (seated)	119*
Balcony (seated)	28
Total: 366*	

*Wheelchair positions can be provided on the flat floor area or on the balcony in several different configurations. The total seat number would be reduced by 8-12 depending on the format chosen



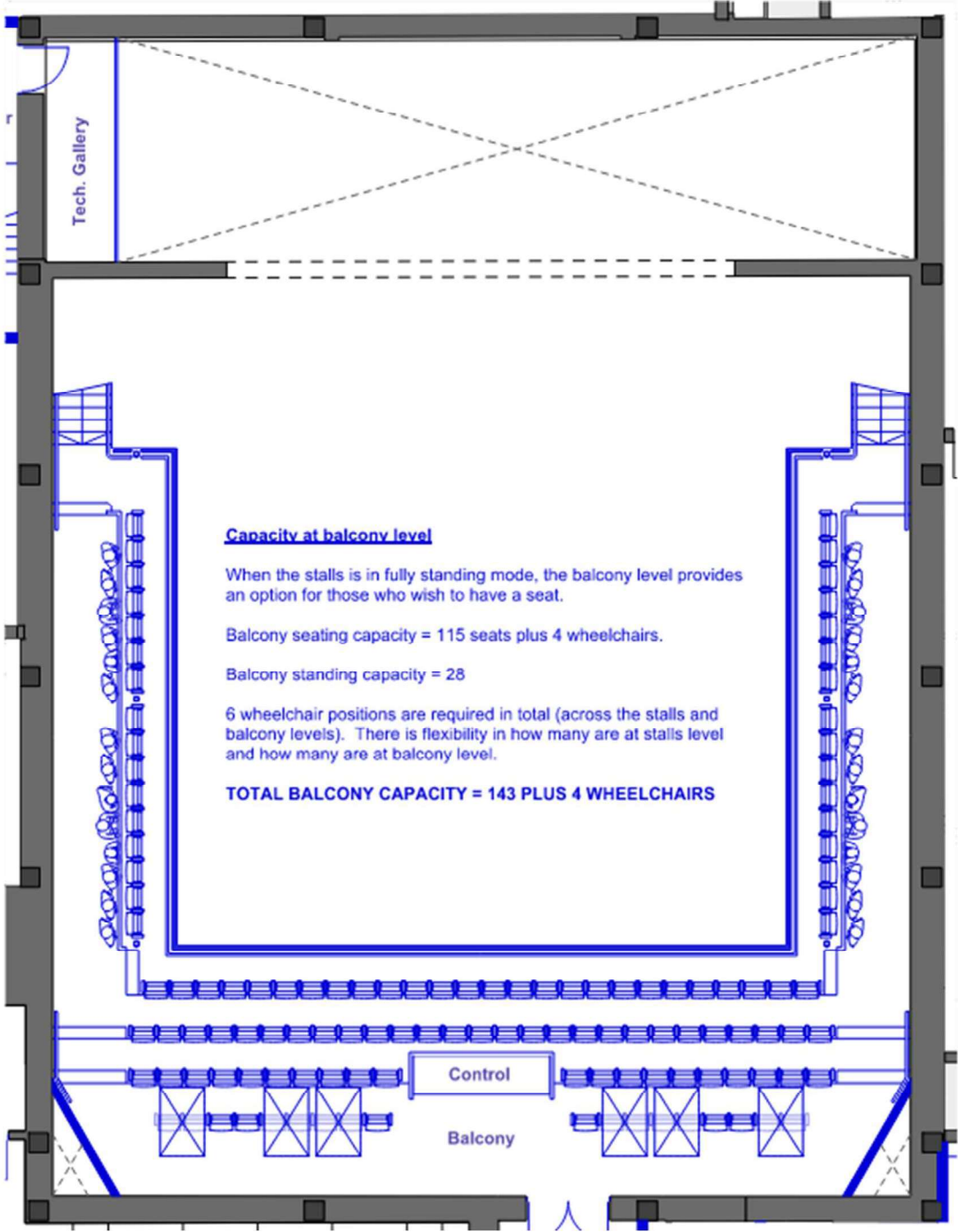
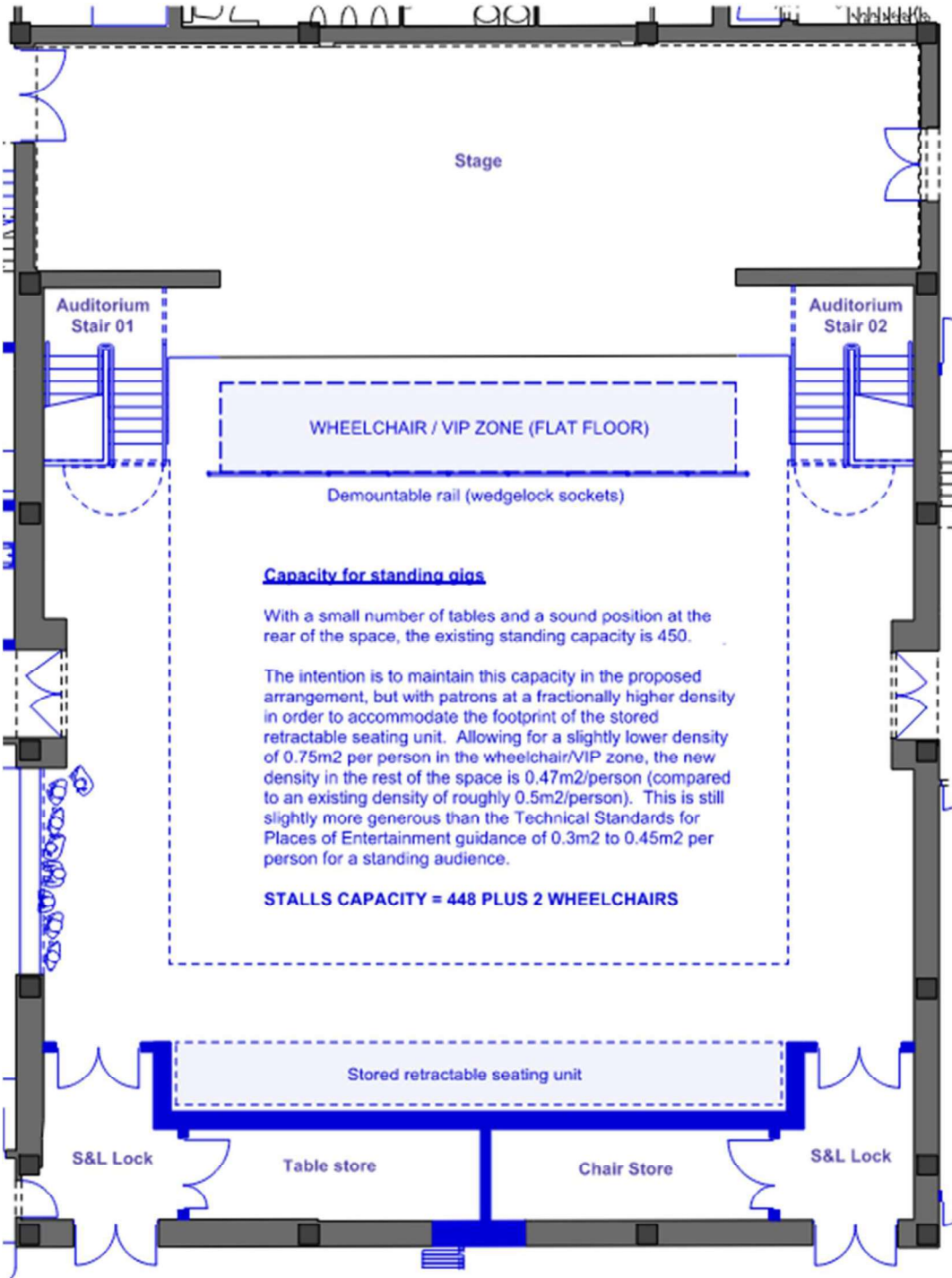
2.4.3. FLAT FLOOR GIGS

Option 2 gives the venue more options of a varied experience for audience members with its predominantly standing crowd on the ground floor, seats and standing rooms on the balcony and side slips.

FLAT FLOOR GIG FORMAT CAPACITY

Stalls capacity	448*
Balcony	143*
Total: 591*	

*Wheelchair positions can be provided on the flat floor area or on the balcony in several different configurations. The total seat number would be reduced by 8-12 depending on the format chosen



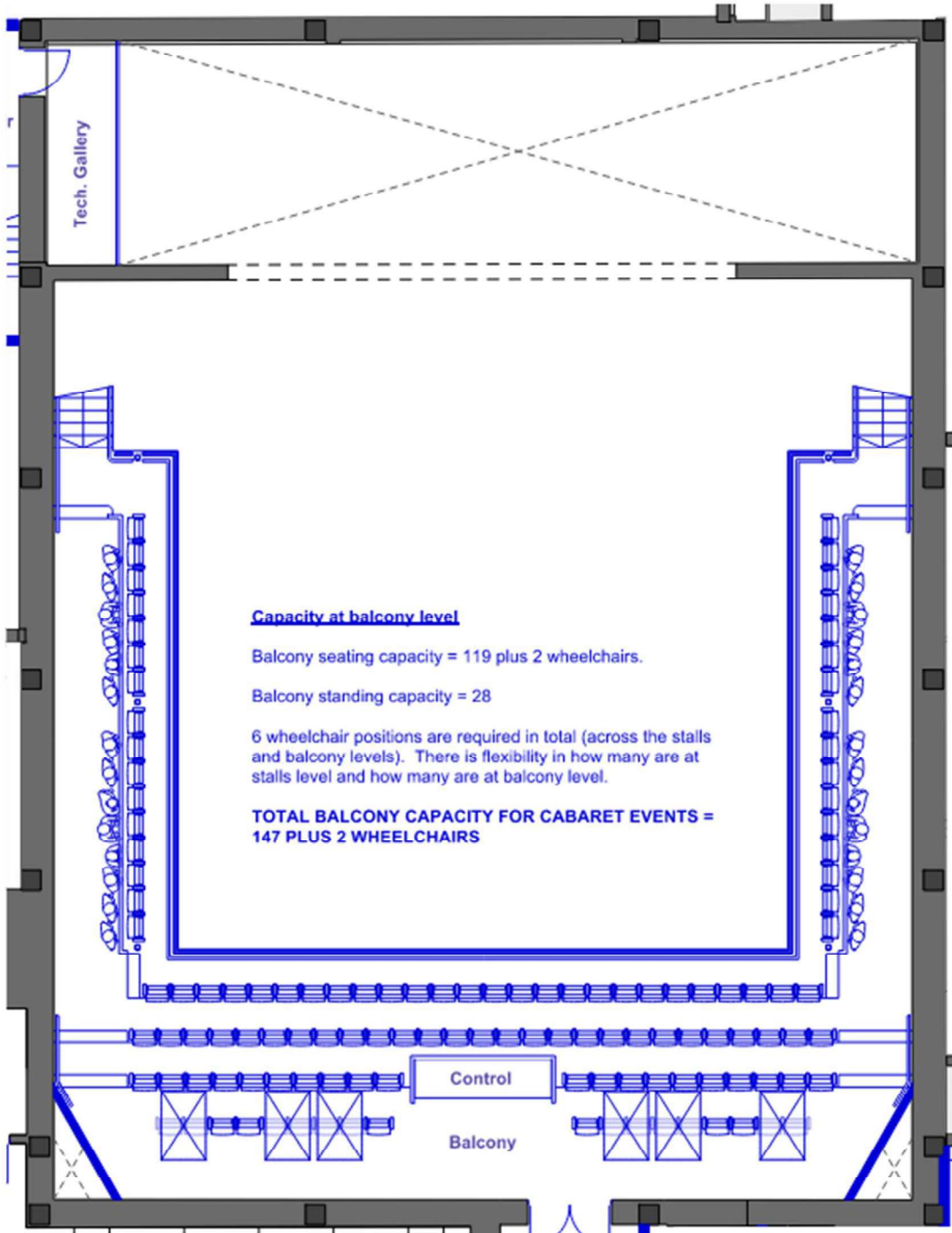
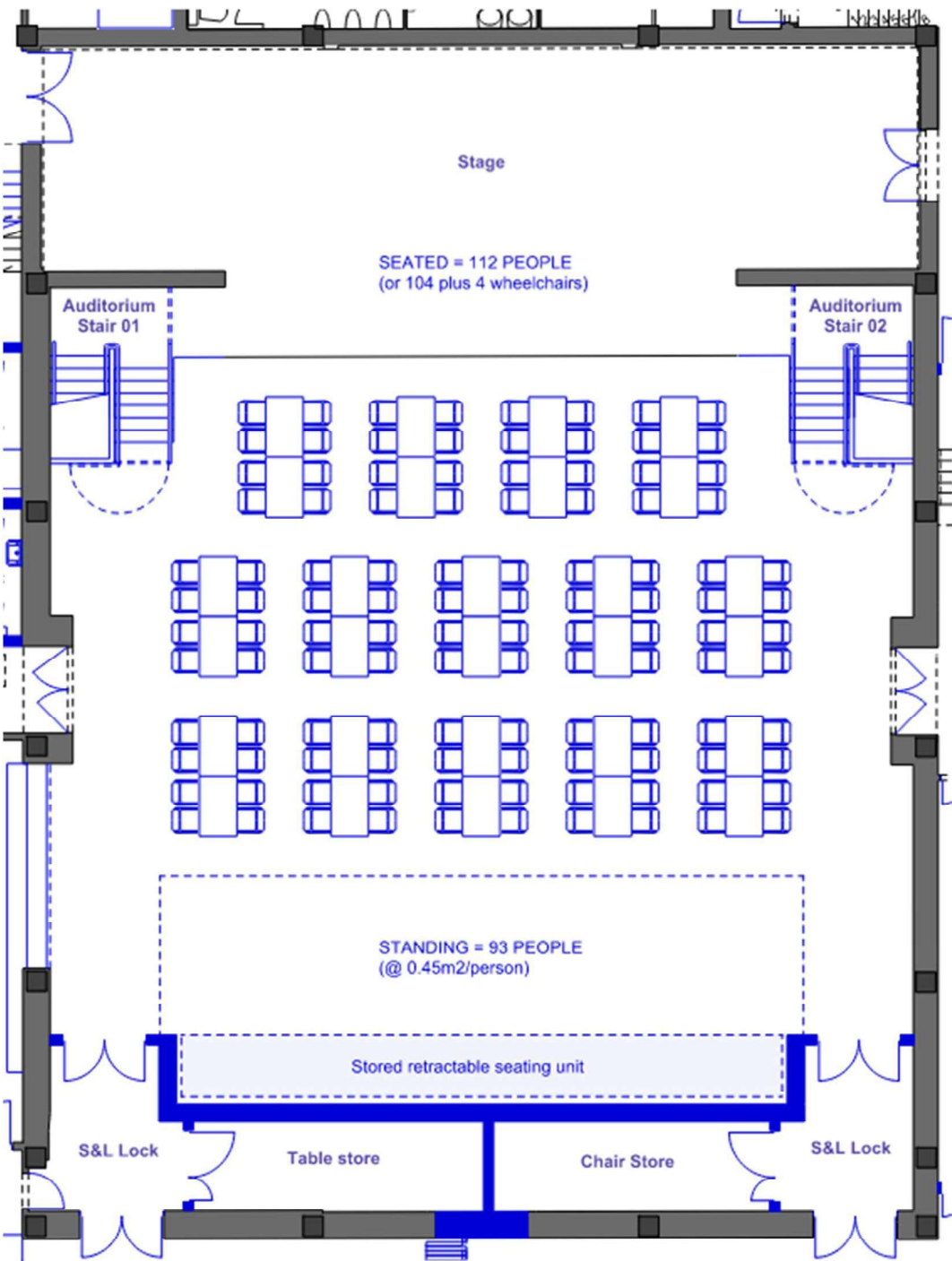
2.4.5. CABARET SEATING

The current cabaret layout caters for patrons seated around tables, and standing. The format will have added seating opportunities on the balcony.

CABARET SEATING FORMAT CAPACITY

Seated (at tables)	112*
Standing (ground floor)	93
Seated (balcony)	119*
Standing (balcony)	28
Total: 352*	

* 6 wheelchair positions can be provided on the flat floor or on the balcony in several different configurations. The total seat number would be reduced by 8-12 depending on the format chosen



2.5. Option 1 & 2 Precedents

We have identified several venues that have similarities to The Harlington Options 1 & 2 in terms of layout and format options. It might be beneficial for the client and design team to visit a couple of these venues as part of a study tour as the project develops during Stage 2.

2.5.1. JW3, LONDON

A north London venue with a retractable seating unit and a small balcony and a side slip on one side. Capacity for 265 raked seating, 300 standing capacity and 180 for cabaret seating/sit down meal.



2.5.2. CAMBRIDGE JUNCTION

Cambridge Junction is a live music and arts venue located close to the city's main railway station. It has a main hall 'J1' with a 850 capacity for flat floor gigs and 'J2', a smaller venue with a retractable unit with a 220 seat capacity.



2.5.3. CORN EXCHANGE, BRIGHTON

The Corn Exchange is part of the larger Brighton Dome complex and provides a flexible space with retractable seating and a fixed balcony for many formats adjacent to the 1,700 seater concert hall. Larger than the Harlington it has a capacity for 505 seated, 400 for cabaret and up to 800 for standing gigs.



2.5.4. QUARTERHOUSE, FOLKESTONE

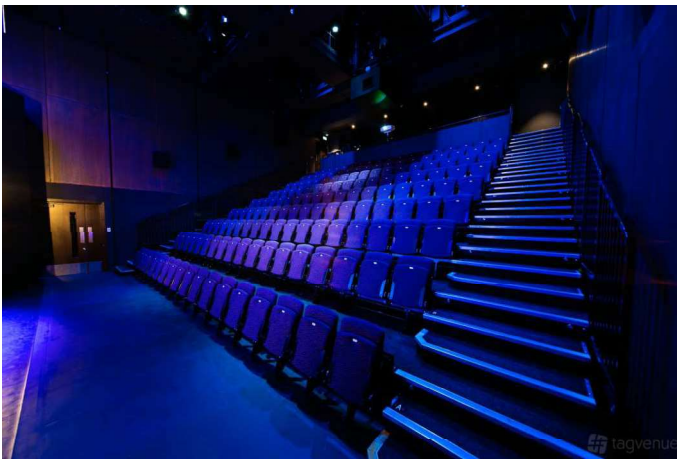
The main auditorium at Folkestone Quarterhouse is configurable to several different formats: theatre seating for 250 on the retractable seating unit and balcony, and flat floor capacity of 490.



2.5.5. BRIXTON HOUSE, LONDON

A brand new building (2023) in South London with a series of performance and rehearsal spaces. The two flexible theatres seating 200 and 120 people respectively.

Brixton House also features several flexible rehearsal spaces.



2.6. Option 3

In addition to the studies for Options 1 & 2. The client also commissioned a simple study for a secondary performance space to be located outside the perimeter of the current building.

No detailed design has been requested at this stage, however we have listed a few examples of other venues that could be a starting point for a future design

2.6.1. PRECEDENT- BRISTOL OLD VIC STUDIO

A highly flexible space with approximately 150 seats. Whilst this space is bigger than the anticipated space at The Harlington, we think their use of variable height seating to get improved sightlines over a flat floor is worth considering.

The Bristol Old Vic Studio have seating that is low on the front row (coffee table height benches), regular height benches for the middle row, and bar stool height benches on the third row, creating a rake without the need for rostra. This makes the studio highly flexible for a range of events with or without a seated audience. Instead of benches, this type of seating arrangement can be created with chairs.



Studio at Bristol Old Vic - Interior

2.6.2. PRECEDENT- THE SHED, NATIONAL THEATRE

A temporary venue built to one side of the National Theatre whilst it was undergoing redevelopment. The volume for the space contained the performance venue whilst using dressing rooms and WC facilities in the main theatre.

Inspiration can be drawn from The Shed in terms of providing an additional space next to an existing venue whilst not having to provide all the support facilities a new building would.



The Shed, National Theatre – Exterior



The Shed, National Theatre – Interior

2.6.3. PRECEDENT- MARIA STUDIO, YOUNG VIC

The Young Vic Maria Studio is a robust venue, suitable for rehearsals as well as performances. The format of the highly flexible space can be changed to suit a variety of events using modular seating platforms.

The time and cost associated of changing the room for different format, should be considered against the possibilities of different performances it could enable.



Maria Studio, Young Vic, – Interior

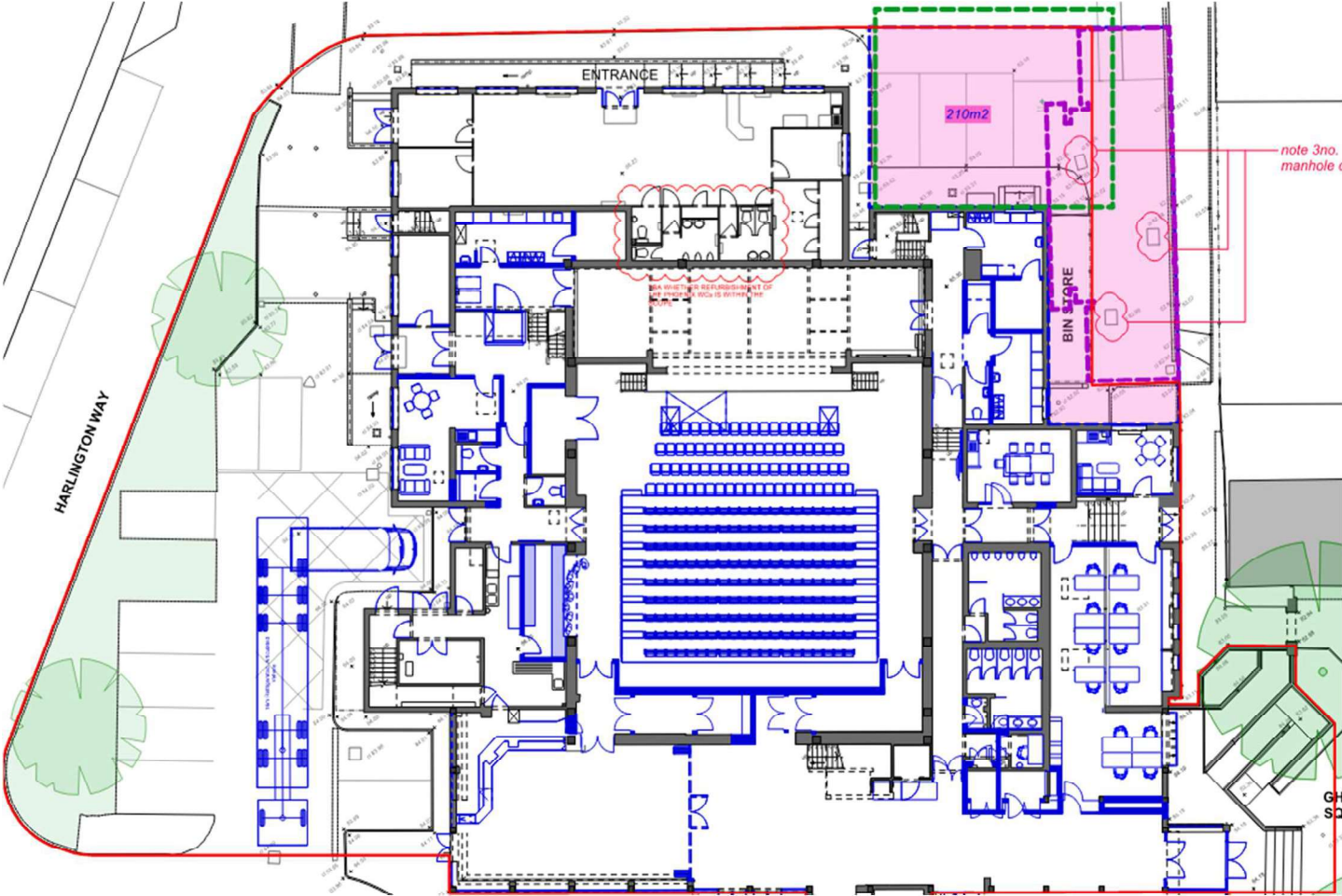


Maria Studio, Young Vic, – Interior

2.6.4. OPTION 3A – PROS & CONS

This location provides good access to the backstage areas enabling the studio to support events on the main stage – such as a larger dressing room / green room space. It does however mean that access to the studio by audiences or other users whilst the main stage is in use will need careful coordination to ensure sufficient separation and clear wayfinding. The proximity does also increase the risk of noise transference, but this could be minimised through operational controls and construction options.

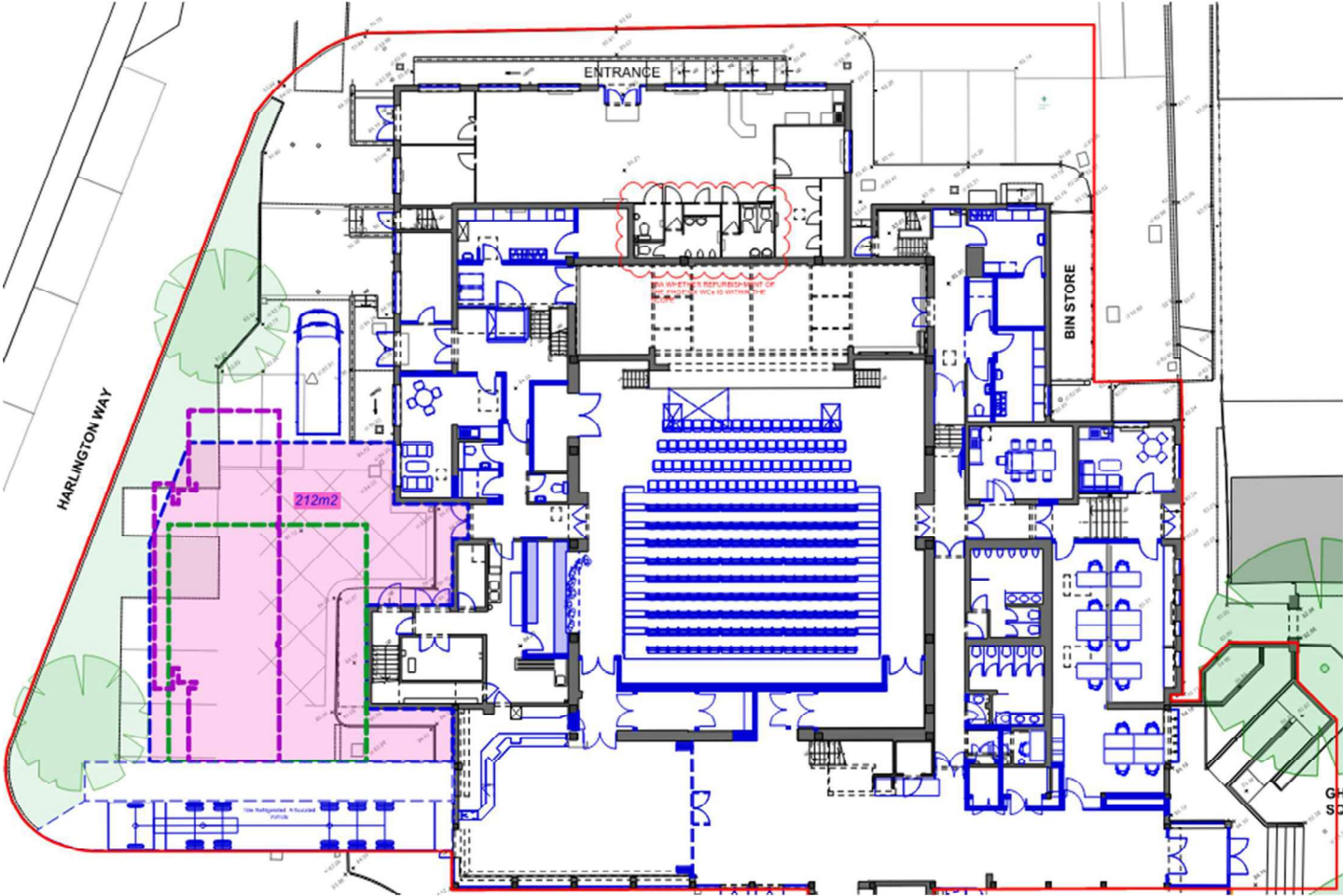
Option 3a



2.6.5. OPTION 3B – PROS & CONS

This location will complicate access to the current get in location. This would need to be evaluated and resolved to ensure the venue can operate efficiently. Unlike option 3A this location will be difficult to use as a support space for backstage areas. But it will be easier for the public to access through the existing public areas. There is a slightly better physical separation which may enable better concurrent use of the two spaces without any issues. However, there will still need to be careful consideration to ensure that this can happen.

Option 3b



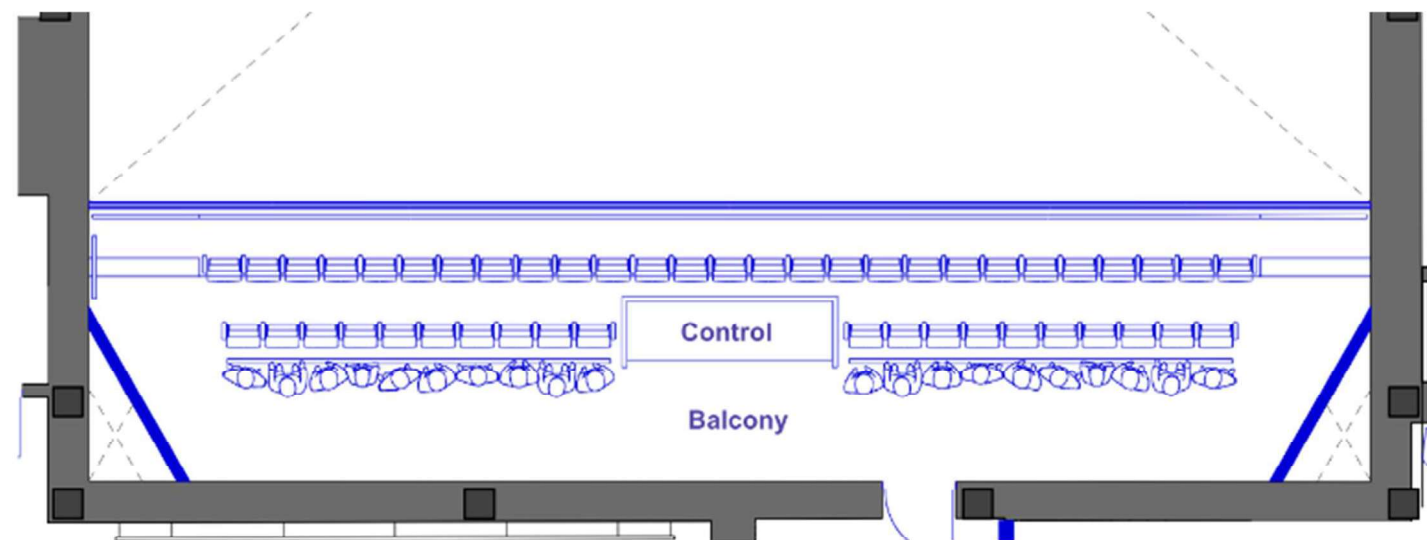
2.7. Support Facilities & Ancillary Spaces

2.7.1. CONTROL ROOM & SOUND MIX POSITION

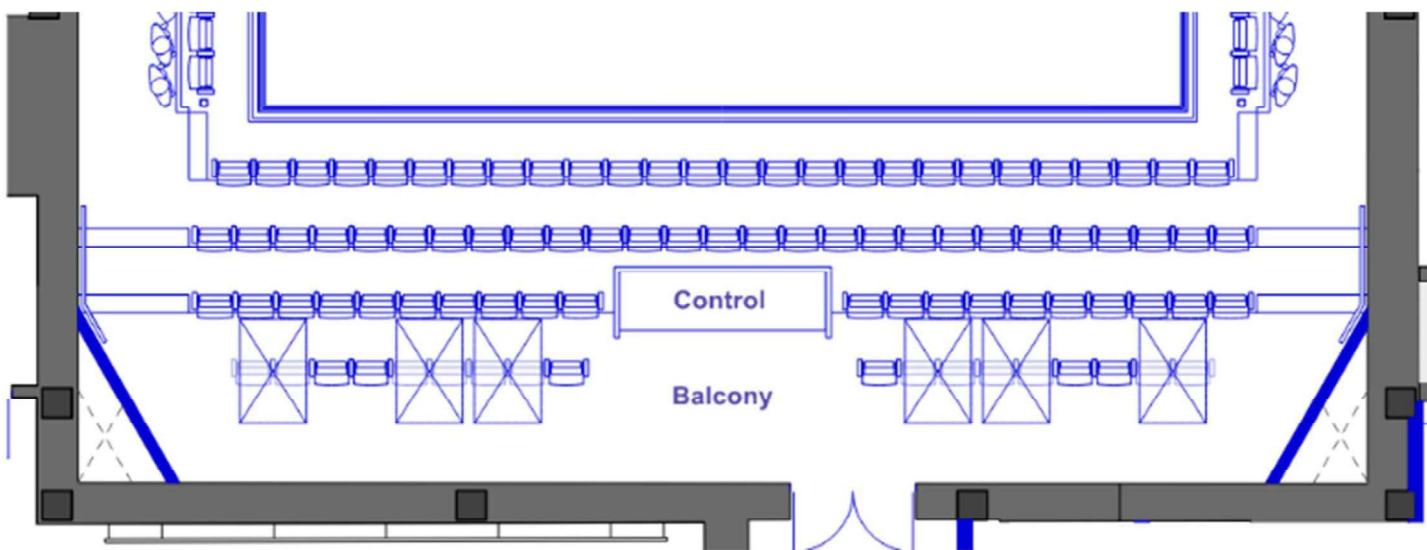
One of the main interventions proposed have is to remove the current control room due to poor accessibility and instead relocate to the balcony with an open control position that would be level with the first floor and serve as the top of the retractable seating unit. It will have lift access from the lift located in the foyer.

Level access to the lift will greatly improve transportation of sound and lighting equipment to be used for productions.

Option 1



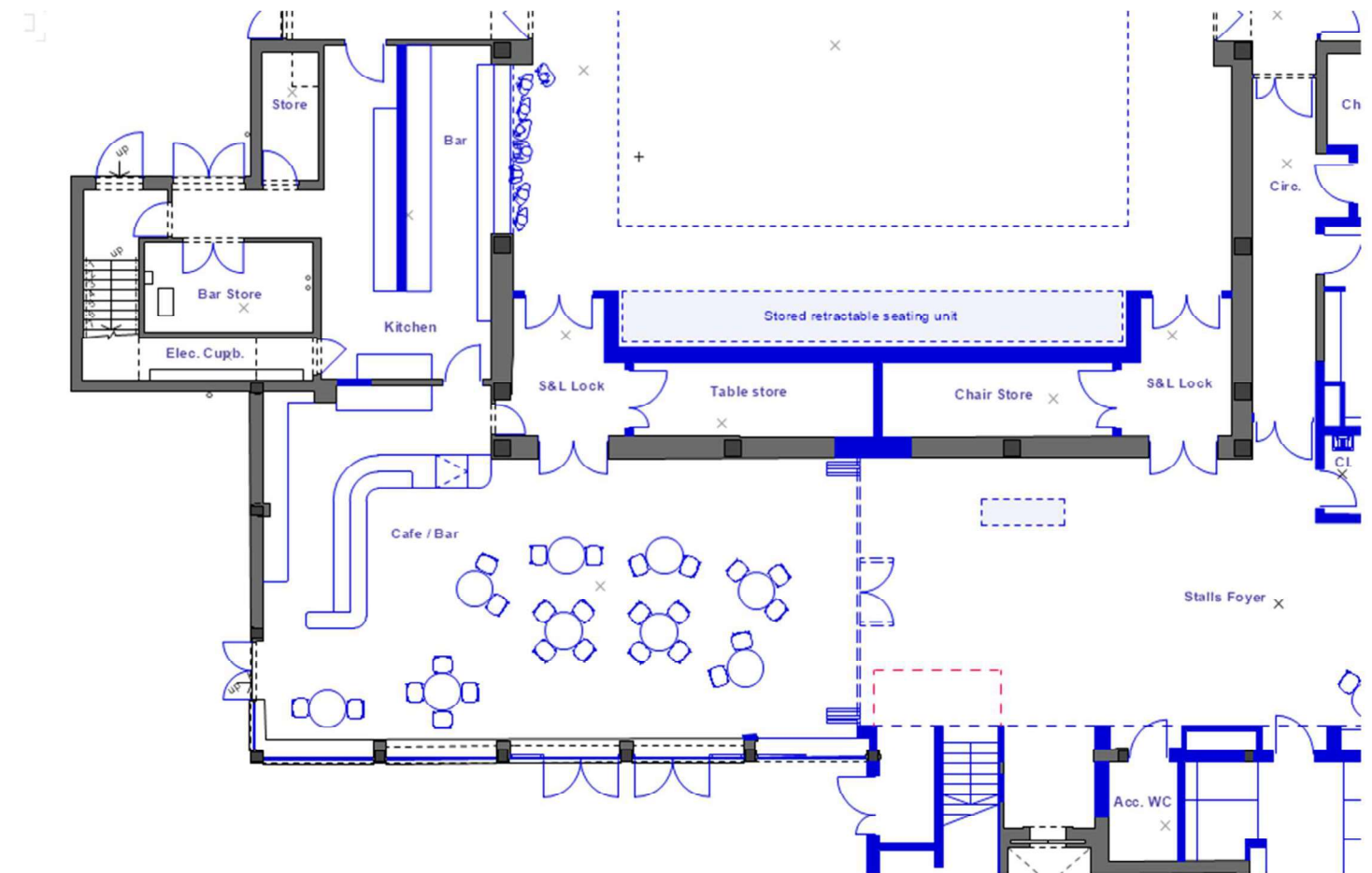
Option 2



2.7.2. BAR

Both option 1 and 2 have the bar inside the venue relocated from its current position at the rear to the side to allow for the retractable seating unit to be stored without losing visual connection to the stage. This bar will only be open during flat floor concerts, comedy gigs and some cabaret seating events when general sounds levels allow for it.

When the retractable unit is in use, for theatre events or quieter presentations, the café and bar reached from the outside of the venue will be solely in use.



Bar/Café Options - Ground Floor Plan - Extract