

The Guardian

Conservation society clashes with Disney over missing historic letters

Campaigners call for return of 1930s wording to Twentieth Century Fox Film Co former offices

Vanessa Thorpe

Sun 10 May 2020 07:39 BST



The portico with the lettering removed. Campaigners want to see it reinstated.
Photograph: The Soho Society

Disney, titan of the media and entertainment world, has enraged a group of Londoners attempting to preserve one of Soho's best-known squares. And the battle is over one word: "Fox".

In the south-west corner of Soho Square stands Twentieth Century House, a grand emblem of the American film industry's key role in this part of the city since 1937. It is now in the hands of Disney.

This week The Soho Society, which campaigns for the conservation of the area, has called on Disney to replace the historic lettering on the portico, removed some time last month. The sign said Twentieth Century Fox Film Co Ltd.

One of the missing words, "Fox", completes the famous title of the old Hollywood studio giant, but now also signifies an American news channel that no longer has a financial connection to the film company, or with Disney.

Disney does, however, own Twentieth Century Television, and the old sign may have value for that reason.

“What we seem to have here is an unseemly tussle involving the names of media monoliths,” said Tim Lord, chair of The Soho Society this weekend. “The removal of the brass serif lettering, however it happened, has left damage to the front of the building.”

Disney has been in charge of the building for a year, since its purchase of Twentieth Century Fox’s assets. Disney rents the building from Royal London, but a letter seen by the *Observer* makes it clear the property company had not given consent for Disney to remove the lettering.



How the building used to look. Photograph: Julie Edwards/Alamy

“Royal London had received a list of elements the tenant has wanted to take with them (including the lettering) on departure, but their exit from the building has not yet been agreed/documentated. The tenant has therefore acted without permission to remove these items,” the letter reads.

Royal London has contacted Disney’s leasing agency to raise its own concerns, it claims, and Disney has indicated it is looking into the matter.

“The future of Soho is under threat in many ways in this current crisis, with all its restaurants and bars closed,” said Lord. “Which is why we remain particularly concerned to protect its built history and heritage.”

Last year Royal London applied to demolish the building, but it has since agreed to retain part of the facade.

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