



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES- ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE

Regal Theatre gives a sculptural quality to the intersection of Rokeby and Hay Streets by sensitively addressing the corner location and articulating the corner with a prominent tower. The vertical and horizontal elements of the building create a pleasing architectural tension resolved by the tower. The equal cognisance of the importance of both major streets through this architectural resolution shows a sophisticated sensitivity to the urban design considerations of a major intersection and provides pleasing plasticity. (Criterion 1.1)

Regal Theatre is an excellent example of the cinema architecture of the Inter-War period. (Criterion 1.2)

Regal Theatre is a local landmark and gives definition to the south-western corner of Subiaco's busiest intersection at the corner of Hay Street and Rokeby Road. (Criterion 1.3)

The form and shape of the building and the tower establishes a pleasing relationship with the corner feature of the *Subiaco Hotel* on the corner diagonally opposite. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Regal Theatre represents the high standard of cinema venues available to Western Australians, close to their areas of residence, in the 1930s. (Criterion 2.1)

Regal Theatre, together with the *Regal Picture Gardens* (now demolished), and the *Subiaco Hotel* contributed to the entertainment precinct of Subiaco during the Inter-War period. (Criterion 2.1)

Regal Theatre represents the growth in the motion picture industry during the 1930s and the importance of film as a form of inexpensive mass entertainment in this period. (Criterion 2.2)

Regal Theatre represents the sophistication of the services offered to residents of Subiaco in the 1930s. (Criterion 2.2)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Regal Theatre is highly valued by the community. The place has been used as a regular place of entertainment by the broader Perth community for nearly sixty years. Recent press comment (*The Weekly Post* 1 February 1994) has emphasised that

the building still excites a high level of interest in the local and broader community. (Criterion 4.1)

The prominence of the *Regal Theatre* at Subiaco's busiest intersection contributes to the community's sense of place. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

Regal Theatre is a rare example of an intact inter-war cinema of the 1930s in Western Australia. The *Regal Theatre* is still used, although converted to live theatre, for an entertainment purposes similar to its original function. Most other local cinemas have either been demolished or converted to other recreational uses. Although the conversion has necessitated removal of the screen, the public areas of the *Regal Theatre* are substantially intact with little alteration from the original. (Criterion 5.1)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Regal Theatre demonstrates the principal characteristics of the Art Deco style as applied to cinema design. (Criterion 6.1)

Regal Theatre is representative of a type and style of cinematic experience which was common in Perth and suburbs in the inter-war years but has subsequently become rare as cinemas were demolished or converted to alternate uses. (Criterion 6.2)

12.3 CONDITION

Regal Theatre is in sound condition. The construction of the new fly tower has been concurrent with a general refurbishment of the theatre and restoration of features. The refurbishment has been undertaken in consultation with the Heritage Council and the Art Deco Society.

12.4 INTEGRITY

In general, the internal fabric remains largely unchanged with the majority of original features still extant. The retention of much of the original fabric of the cinema and the sympathetic extensions and modifications made to the buildings to accommodate live performance has, to a high degree, been in keeping with the original design intent. The *Regal Theatre* has a high degree of integrity.

12.5 AUTHENTICITY

Regal Theatre has a high degree of authenticity as very few alterations, apart from the removal of the original screen, some modification of the backstage areas and a change of function of some of the rooms from public to administrative, has occurred. The auditorium and front of house is largely unchanged. The conversion of the cinema into a theatre has not significantly diminished the major part of the original fabric of the place nor would it be difficult to reinstate a screen within the auditorium to show cinema. Construction of a new fly tower at the rear of the site to house technical components of theatrical production has not reduced the authenticity of the place. Overall, the building remains an excellent example of the cinematic style of the inter-war period.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Regal Theatre was built, in 1936, as a 'hardtop' cinema for Messrs. Coade and A. T. Hewitt on the site of a former place of entertainment known as the *Coliseum*

Picture Gardens (1925).³² At the same time an outdoor summer picture garden was constructed, for the same company, on the opposite (eastern) side of Rokeby Road at the intersection of Hay Street.³³ This was called the *Regal Picture Gardens*.³⁴ The two venues provided entertainment in both summer and winter that was enjoyed by many thousands of Western Australians.

Regal Theatre was built to show movies with sound. The sound revolution in cinema, at the beginning of the 1930s, renewed interest in cinema and attracted many film-goers which resulted in a boom in the entertainment industry in the interwar period.³⁵ The new 'talkies' depicted glamorous Hollywood movie stars acting out luxurious lifestyles - far from the reality of the everyday conditions of the Depression in which the majority of the viewers lived. Yet, for a small cost, cinema goers could enjoy both the visual experience and the social escapism of the film world, in modern, elegant, surroundings with dinner-jacketed staff in attendance.³⁶

Built with sleek, modern lines to reflect the modernity and sophistication of the new age,³⁷ the cinemas were usually within walking distance of their patrons, and were also well serviced by transport. The *Regal Theatre* was situated on the major intersection of Subiaco, on a major tram route and within walking distance of the railway station. It was built to take the maximum advantage of its prominent and busy site. The facade is cognisant of the equal importance of both street facades, and addresses the junction with a stepped parapet which culminates in a strongly modelled corner tower. This corner feature reflects the tower of the *Subiaco Hotel* on the diagonally opposite corner and is an easily identifiable local landmark. The modernity of the building design, in one of Perth's oldest suburbs, has been described as an expression of confidence in the growth of Perth and the State.³⁸

Regal Theatre was named in honour of King George VI who, at the time of the opening of the cinema, had recently ascended the throne. This connection was later accentuated by the installation of a Crown and neon lettering reading *Regal* over the front entrance.³⁹

There is some uncertainty over the attribution of the design of *Regal Theatre*. It is said to have been designed by William T. Leighton and later modified by William G. Bennett. William Leighton was a noted cinema specialist architect in the 1930s. His other cinemas included the *Piccadilly Theatre and Arcade*, *Como Theatre*, *Astor Theatre*, *Windsor Theatre*, *Grand Theatre*, and a refurbishment of the *Royal Theatre*.⁴⁰ He had a distinctive personal style which blended decorative motifs with horizontal and vertical paneling.⁴¹ Bennett was a well known and prolific architect during the

³² Art Deco Society of WA, *The Regal Theatre, Subiaco* (pamphlet, 1993).

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ National Trust Assessment Exposition, June 1990.

³⁵ Honniball, J. M. H. 'The Golden Age of Cinema in Perth' in *Early Days*, vol. 8, part 6, 1982, p. 44.

³⁶ Thorne, R. *Cinemas of Australia via USA* (Sydney, Sydney University Department of Architecture, 1981) p. 34.

³⁷ Geneve, V. 'The Regal Theatre' (Art Deco Handbill, not dated.).

³⁸ Geneve, V. 'Versions of Modernism in Western Australian Cinema Design 1930-1940', Vols 1. & 3. (University of W. A., Masters Thesis, Department of Fine Arts, 1991,) vol. 1, .p. 71.

³⁹ Art Deco Society of WA, pamphlet.

⁴⁰ Geneve, V. 'Obituary: William Thomas Leighton' in *The Architect*, Winter 1990, vol. 2, p. 7.

⁴¹ Geneve, 'Versions of Modernism...' vol. 3, p. 61.

thirties through to the mid-seventies and was responsible for the *Plaza Theatre* in Hay Street and other cinemas in the regional and metropolitan area. A claim is that the initial design came from Leighton's office and that a draughtsman working in his office at the time left his employ to work with Bennett taking the drawings for the *Regal Theatre* with him to the new office.⁴²

The *Regal Theatre* opened on the evening of 27 April 1938 with a topical film: "Lover under Fire" set during the Spanish Civil War, which war was being fought at the time. The supporting film was "Shall We Dance?" with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

In 1946, the *Regal Theatre* was sold to Clarence (Paddy) Baker, whose name is commemorated in the present trust which owns the theatre: The Baker Trust. Paddy Baker was a veteran picture show man who had been associated with the industry since childhood, and with the site since the Coliseum days.⁴³ After an eventful youth, Baker started his own travelling picture show which he operated until 1946, at which time he purchased the *Regal Theatre*.

In the late 1960s, the *Regal Theatre* was used to show ballet productions⁴⁴ but, in the main, it continued in use as a cinema, until the 1970s when the limited number of films able to be shown and direct competition from television and videos threatened its survival. A proposal to refurbish the theatre for live performance while *His Majesty's Theatre* in Hay Street, Perth was being renovated was accepted and, in 1977, John Thornton and Stan Bird leased the *Regal Theatre* and converted it to live theatre. The venue was used occasionally to screen films. This dual use saved the *Regal Theatre* from demolition or conversion to other uses, a fate which befell the majority of suburban cinemas in Perth.

In 1986, Paddy Baker died and vested the *Regal Theatre* to the people of Western Australia.⁴⁵ It is now owned, on behalf of the public of Western Australia, by the Baker Trust, which was established in the year preceding Paddy's death.⁴⁶ The Trustees (in February 1995) are: Victor J. Barker, Richard V. Diggins, Ian Lyon, Paul Tammerijn and John Thornton.

Since 1986, the *Regal Theatre* has been used exclusively as a live theatrical venue and regularly features shows by Australian and International performers.

In 1993-4, alterations and additions were made to upgrade the production facilities of the *Regal Theatre* to maintain economic viability in the face of increasing competition from other theatrical and show venues in Perth. The extensions did not interfere with the original fabric of the building.

A proposal by the Baker Trust and architects Donaldson, Smith and Hooke to extend the Rokeby Road facade of the building to disguise the additions and to incorporate stylistically-similar shops and offices is currently mooted for construction in 1994/5. Subiaco Town Council has approved the development in principle although formal approval has not been given at the time of writing this report.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Regal Theatre is a three-storey cinema built, in 1936, for Messrs. Coade and A. T. Hewitt. The *Regal Theatre* is built of load bearing brick which has been

⁴² Geneve, 'Versions of Modernism...' vol. 1, p. 69.

⁴³ Art Deco Society of WA, pamphlet.

⁴⁴ Bell, M. D. *Perth - A Cinema History* (Sussex, Book Guild, 1986) p. 45.

⁴⁵ Art Deco Society of WA, pamphlet

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

rendered to the street facades in a plain, light-tone in the Art Deco style.⁴⁷ A corrugated iron shallow pitched roof is concealed behind a parapet.

Regal Theatre is at the intersection of Hay Street and Rokeby Road, two of the busiest and most important routes through Subiaco, and in close proximity to the railway station to the north and the, then, tram and trolley bus routes along Hay and Rokeby Roads. The theatre is considerably enhanced by the rounded facade which gives cognisance to the corner site and establishes a pleasing relationship with the hotel opposite. The two-tiered half-cylindrical tower, is accented with ribbed vertical bands which emphasise the verticality of the stepped "banner". The strongly expressed verticality of the tower is visually a separate entity from the rest of the facade, growing out of it in a series of stepped forms that emphasise the basic symmetry of the design and produce a stepped silhouette against the skyline. The verticality is balanced by horizontal banding and squared tiles at the top of the half cylinder and also by a dual pair of horizontally glazed steel frame windows at the base. Flanking the tower on either side, the horizontal wings have strong detailing at the top, with recessed bands tying together a long row of windows topped by a cantilevered concrete eyebrow.⁴⁸ Vyonne Geneve suggests the relationship between the vertical illuminated name panel and the other vertical and horizontal decorative banding is quite different from the treatment used in the other cinemas of the period in Perth.⁴⁹

The central axis of the facade and foyer is situated on a diagonal, whereas the auditorium runs parallel to Rokeby Road, with an unequal face to each street.⁵⁰ To maintain the symmetry of the corner location, the facade facing Rokeby Road has a large area of false walling, including false windows, to balance the volume of the building in the Hay Street elevation. The symmetrical treatment of the street facade disguises the bulk of the brick walled auditorium.⁵¹ A suspended awning projects over the pavement and incorporates panels for the advertisement of the various shows. The awning increases the horizontality of the form of the building which reduces the impression of bulk created by the auditorium.

The front door of the *Regal Theatre* addresses the corner and the curved facade addresses the street and displays a crown and the word *Regal*. Internally, the detailing is quite different from that of other cinemas, with more geometric Art Deco graphic and chromium trims, and with none of the decorative ornamentation characteristic of the cinema interiors designed by Leighton.⁵² The interior decoration of the walls and ceiling is modern and simple, relying on mass and boldness for effect.⁵³ The theatre features sans serif lettering both internally and externally, and has chrome and glass detailing.⁵⁴ Sophisticated touches included a linear fountain design and the letter 'R' (for Regal) accentuating the front doors. These give access

⁴⁷ Apperly, R., Irving, R., Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture. Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. (Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1989), pp. 188-191.

⁴⁸ Geneve, 'Versions of Modernism...' vol. 1, pp. 71-72.

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 69.

⁵⁰ Art Deco Society of WA, pamphlet.

⁵¹ Geneve, 'Versions of Modernism...' vol. 1, p. 72.

⁵² *ibid.* p. 69.

⁵³ *ibid.* pp. 70, 71, 73.

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 72.

to the entrance foyer which is octagonal in shape and has a false ceiling and rubber marbled floor treatment.⁵⁵

The theatre was designed as a compact, modern theatre to seat 1,050 people in the auditorium and circle.⁵⁶ Lounge spaces, a pram room and crying room were provided. The crying room was a sound proofed enclosure at the rear of the auditorium in which mothers could sit and view the programme with their children without disturbing other people. The sound was connected by means of an adjustable amplifier in the room.⁵⁷ Access to the crying room, together with the female lavatories was at the end of the Hay Street foyer. Also accessed from the same foyer was the pram room, with special bays for baby prams, where the patrons could leave offspring while seeing the show. All the bays were numbered and when a baby cried the number of the bay was flashed onto the screen several times to summon the parent.⁵⁸ The curved balcony lounge was furnished in a homely style and had bullet shaped light fittings which are still extant.

The combination of the parallel auditorium and diagonally oriented entrance foyer on the corner necessitated the provision of a 'crush space' in the form of a long corridor. Running parallel to Hay Street this crush space has large windows and is lit by octagonal light fittings at night. The area is furnished with lounge chairs, and lined with showcases, framed in chromium plate, which advertise the forthcoming shows.⁵⁹

The Manager's office was originally located under the stairs leading to the dress circle and lounge. The door was provided with a glass peephole, through which the manager could view the activities in the foyer area. An escape corridor down the side of the auditorium led to the male lavatories. The toilet was indicated by a painted sign featuring a top-hatted gentleman: a very cosmopolitan feature, at the time, for a theatre built in a predominantly working class suburb.⁶⁰

Upstairs, above the entrance foyer, is a crush area with solid jarrah doors, with mullions in close pairing, providing an horizontal banded effect. The glass on the toilet doors upstairs is sandblasted with a distinctive pattern featuring 'Milady' and 'Gentlemen'. An octagonal shape, reminiscent of the shape of the lower foyer, is repeated in the light fitting in the centre of the area and the lettering style of the foyer below is also repeated in the chrome and glass of the ticket booths. Sandblasted glass is again used to effect in a changeable price list displayed over the ticket box.⁶¹

The projection room was situated upstairs and was of a moderate size. The theatre's projection equipment consisted of Simplex units with RCA sound heads, 35mm with hand-fed arcs. There were several Siemens 2000 series projection units and, in later years, 16mm Ikai projectors were installed with special wide-screen lenses. The sound system was of 1,000 watt rating.⁶²

⁵⁵ *ibid.* pp. 73-4.

⁵⁶ Bell, p. 44.

⁵⁷ Geneve, 'Versions of Modernism...' vol. 1, pp. 70, 73.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 73.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.* A similar feature was also used in the *Piccadilly Theatre* in Perth, Thorne, p. 266.

⁶¹ *ibid.* p. 74.

⁶² Bell, pp. 44-45.

The screen was portable, of the lace-up variety, and in the late 1960s the stage was enlarged to accommodate ballet programmes.⁶³ The fabric of the building was further altered in the refurbishment and conversion to a live theatre in 1977. Lighting frames were installed on the walls on either side of the proscenium arch to accommodate stage lights. The frames were painted the same colour as the walls. Other changes were predominantly decorative and included the installation of some inappropriate chandeliers in the foyer area and a change of decor colour - the green accents of the cinema were changed to red as green is considered an unlucky colour in the theatre and the original linoleum was removed and red carpet laid.

In 1986, a complete conversion to a live theatrical venue took place and the original picture screen was removed and the projection room converted for use as a control box for stage lighting. A rack for lighting was suspended from the ceiling near the edge of the balcony. Air conditioning was installed and new toilets provided. A new bar: 'Paddy's Bar' was built in the upstairs crush space. There was some change of the use of some of the internal spaces. The crying room was converted to the managers office, and other areas (such as the pram room) were merged with the auditorium space. There was also the creation of a small museum space in a former corridor, together with the conversion of a former ticket box into a feature piece with display boards and other jarrah advertising features from the era. These changes do not significantly alter the fabric of the place. Original features include the crying room signage, the Art Deco chrome and jarrah fittings including the ticket box, the motif of 'Milady' and 'Gentleman' on the lavatory doors and some of the original furniture, including a 'love seat' upstairs.⁶⁴

In 1993, a colour bond steel clad fly tower was built at the rear of the site to accommodate theatrical stage requirements. The alterations were designed by Donaldson, Smith and Hooke, Architects. The proscenium arch has been left untouched but the stage has been enlarged to 400 square metres, by demolishing a 1960s wall and cutting back some existing brickwork behind the stage area to allow the movement of fly lines. Public access to the theatre and the public facilities have not been changed. Apart from some lightweight framing and fibro-cement walls at the northern end of the stage being removed, there has been minimal interference in the original fabric of the building in this addition. Lighting and sound requirements for each production differ and these are accommodated by changing the lighting format on the frames. New lighting has also been installed behind the proscenium arch.

Further work on the place is anticipated in 1994/5, with the construction of new dressing rooms and shops which would face Rokeby Road, replacing corrugated "temporary" additions which were made, in 1977, when the cinema was converted to a live theatre. These additions will extend the Rokeby Road facade treatment and it is anticipated, the completed facade will disguise the bulk of the fly tower and blend in scale and height with the surrounding structures.

13.3 REFERENCES

Art Deco Society of WA: *The Regal Theatre, Subiaco* (pamphlet, 1993).

Geneve, V. 'Versions of Modernism in Western Australian Cinema Design 1930-1940', vols. 1 & 3 (University of W. A., Masters Thesis, Department of Fine Arts, 1991).

National Trust Assessment Exposition, June 1990.

⁶³ *ibid.* p. 45.

⁶⁴ Art Deco Society of WA, pamphlet.