



# REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

## 11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November, 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

### 11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE\*

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* is significant in displaying aesthetic qualities of the Post-War International style. The formality and rhythm created by the articulated structure are balanced by the interest provided in contrasting materials. (Criterion 1.1)

The proportioning discipline employed throughout the design resulted in an expression of refined simplicity and unity. These qualities are still perceptible externally. (Criterion 1.2)

*Subiaco Theatre Centre*, in its garden park setting, contributes to the aesthetic value of the landscape, and has landmark qualities in the streetscape. (Criterion 1.3)

### 11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

*Subiaco Theatre Centre*, the former Civic Hall, is an important and representative example of civic design for the period, late 1950s and early 1960s, when civic pride and innovative design expressed the confidence of the community. (Criterion 2.1)

The garden park setting displays a sequence of planting and landscape layout styles from the 1940s to the 1980s. (Criterion 2.1)

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* is an important element in the historical development of the City of Subiaco. (Criterion 2.2)

The building had a close association with the architectural firm of F.G.B. Hawkins and Desmond Sands, at the time recognised nationally for their progressive architecture, and the project architect, Peter Parkinson. (Criterion 2.3)

### 11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

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\* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present* North Ryde NSW, Angus & Robertson 1989.

The remnant native trees are of some scientific value, having the potential to yield information about their response to changing conditions. (Criterion 3.1)

#### **11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE**

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* and its garden park setting are important for their role in the social life of the community: the building initially as the Civic Hall and currently as a theatre, and its setting as a continuously used public park. (Criterion 4.1)

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* and its landscape setting contribute to the community's sense of place. (Criterion 4.2)

## **12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE**

### **12. 1. RARITY**

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* is a rare example of post-war architecture in Western Australia where the building design was based on a strict proportioning system. The resultant expression was one of consistency and refined simplicity which is still perceivable externally. (Criterion 5.1)

### **12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS**

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* is characteristic of the Post-War International style embodying many of the principles of modern architecture including simplicity of form, a regular and expressed structure and an austerity in finishes. The garden park setting is representative of municipal gardens reflecting changing tastes in planting and landscape layout over five decades. (Criterion 6.1)

The building is representative of renewed civic confidence and post-war idealism which was reflected in the progressive nature of the building design at the time of construction. (Criterion 6.2)

### **12. 3 CONDITION**

Maintenance at *Subiaco Theatre Centre* since construction has been inconsistent. The recent 'spring clean' has not been effective and has only obscured, rather than addressed deteriorating fabric. The building is in sound condition. A more comprehensive review of the building condition is included in the Heritage Assessment by Ron Bodycoat of Duncan Stephen and Mercer, Architects., 'Former Subiaco Civic Hall. Heritage Assessment', (1996). The gardens are well maintained and in generally good condition.

### **12. 4 INTEGRITY**

Whilst the place still serves a community purpose, there has been a change of function in the provision for theatrical performances. The sustainability of the current arrangement is being investigated at present and is likely to identify the requirement for a larger auditorium. Theatres have been accommodated within the principal volumes but many of the interior finishes and fittings which were integral to the original design have been removed to the extent that the main interior spaces are no longer recognisable. Externally, the original concept is apparent, but has been affected by poor design decisions influencing the location of external services and the surrounding landscaping. The gardens immediately surrounding the building have been changed over time by the introduction of new planting and constructed features in a mainly irregular style obscuring and diminishing the original austerity of the buildings concept. As a result the building has moderate integrity.

## **12.5 AUTHENTICITY**

There have been substantial changes to the interior fabric. External changes are primarily reversible. Thus the building has moderate authenticity. The changes to the garden setting around the building are mainly reversible, by the removal of intrusive elements. The garden setting is therefore of moderate authenticity.

### 13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence for the building has been compiled by Irene Ham-Sauman, Historian. The physical evidence for the building has been compiled by Katrina Chisholm, Graduate Architect. The documentary and physical evidence for the landscape setting has been compiled by Philip Palmer, Thompson Palmer Landscape Architecture.

#### 13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

*Subiaco Theatre Centre*, formerly Subiaco Civic Hall, was constructed in 1957 in Post-War International Style. It was based on the Corbusier Modulor design system.<sup>1</sup>

Subiaco began as a dormitory suburb for workers in Perth and other suburbs. With the opening of the Eastern Railway in 1881, the area began to develop around the railway station. This growth was hastened by the gold boom of the 1890s. By August 1896, the population had reached 1300 and the following year Subiaco was declared a municipality.<sup>2</sup>

A school and a post office were built near the corner of Bagot and Rokeby Roads, and development moved to that area. According to Spillman, Subiaco suffered from isolation and a chronic shortage of amenities. The community developed an attitude of self-help and self-interest.<sup>3</sup> It established its own power plant in 1903.

The power plant was a source of pride, and supplied power at the cheapest rate in Western Australia.<sup>4</sup> Subiaco was forced to close the power plant in 1923, and take power from the government powerhouse. The Council purchased bulk power and distributed it through local substations. In 1950, the profit from this scheme exceeded £5,000.<sup>5</sup> In August 1951, this power distribution system was 'compulsorily acquired' by the government, and Subiaco Council negotiated for compensation.

The Council had wanted a 'suitable grand town hall and civic centre' for many years, but the Depression and World War Two put a hold on the idea. In 1947, Mayor Bathgate noted:

The celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the Municipality emphasised the desperate need for a worthy Civic Centre...The Councillors are very much alive to this need and this will be remedied at the earliest opportunity.<sup>6</sup>

The opportunity came in 1953 when £120,000 was received as compensation for the lost power plant. The Council allocated £100,000 for a Civic Centre.

The 1950s was a period of development and renewal, and in Subiaco 'old houses were demolished to make way for modern units, shops, offices,

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<sup>1</sup> Apperly, R., Irving, R. & Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and terms from 1788 to the present* Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1994, p.214-217.

<sup>2</sup> Spillman, Ken. *Identity Prized: A History of Subiaco* Perth, UWA Press for the City of Subiaco, 1985, pp.75-81.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.75.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.137.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.273.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.276.

warehouses and carpark'.<sup>7</sup> With the declaration of Subiaco a city in 1952, people wanted a modern community. The design of the new Civic Hall reflected contemporary ideas of modernity.

Architect Peter Parkinson, of F.G.B. Hawkins and Desmond Sands, based his design of the Civic Hall on Le Corbusier's 'Modulor', a proportioning system that combined the Fibonacci number system with the average dimensions of the human body. Le Corbusier's design theory hoped to produce an architecture in harmony with nature and the cosmos.<sup>8</sup>

The site chosen was Rankin Gardens, bordered by Hamersley, Hensman and Bagot Roads. This was the municipal park where bands played in a Victorian rotunda on Sundays. John Oldham was retained as landscape architect for the project. The foundation stone of the Civic Hall was laid on 17 November 1956, and the building officially opened a year later, on 30 November 1957. Subiaco Civic Hall was described at the time as 'an ultra modern building of the latest architectural design'.<sup>9</sup>

The hall was in heavy demand. In the first ten months of operation, 25 balls, 13 weddings, 45 dances and 29 other functions were held.<sup>10</sup>

Now that Subiaco had a modern Civic Hall, the old Council Chambers looked dowdy and old-fashioned by comparison. In 1968, new Council Chambers were constructed in the park, and in 1970 a modern library was built beside the old Council Chambers. The following year, the old Chambers were demolished and the land added to the park space to compensate somewhat for the area taken up by the new buildings.<sup>11</sup>

In 1968, alterations were made to the Civic Hall by architectural firm Kenneth Broadhurst, Ryan and Evan to enhance the building's usefulness. The original open undercroft was enclosed to form a Supper Room and Kitchen, and toilet facilities were upgraded. Unfortunately, these changes were not in keeping with the original design.

Use of the Civic Hall gradually diminished and, in 1984, it was converted to *Subiaco Theatre Centre*. The conversion was carried out by the Public Works Department of Western Australia, at a cost of \$350,000. At the time, it was described by Minister for the Arts, Mr Davies, as 'the best investment the government has ever made'.<sup>12</sup> The conversion required converting the Main Hall to a theatre with stage and tiered seating. The upper level was converted to offices and rehearsal room. An external access ramp was added for disabled access, and service areas and toilets changed and enlarged.

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* was the home of the Hole in the Wall Theatre, which opened its first show there on 4 August 1984. *Subiaco Theatre Centre* is also used for Education Department art activities and community arts. The Perth Theatre Trust leases the building from Subiaco City Council for a peppercorn

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.295.

<sup>8</sup> 'Le Corbusier. Architect of the Century'. Exhibition Guide, Hammond Gallery London, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> 'Subiaco City Hall 1958' Case Study: 2 (1939-1965). Architecture Elective Studies, Semester 1, 1995, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Spillman, Ken. *op. cit.*, p.306.

<sup>12</sup> Case Study. *op. cit.*

rent of \$1.00 a year. The rent is paid up until the year 2004.<sup>13</sup> Free family concerts are held at *Subiaco Theatre Centre* on Sunday afternoons from 2.30pm to 4.00pm and, on summer weekends, evening entertainment is presented in the garden.<sup>14</sup>

Subiaco City Council intends retaining *Subiaco Theatre Centre*, and its current use. To this end they have commissioned Jones Coulter Young, Architects and Urban Designers, to investigate the building's status, specifically to rectify structural details in the forty year old building, and look at the requirements for upgrading the facilities.

In the early 1980s, the attitude to development in Subiaco changed. Emphasis turned to restoration of old homes, and construction of new residences and public buildings sympathetic to the suburb's character, and to its image as a 'village' within a city.<sup>15</sup> While *Subiaco Theatre Centre* is not an old Colonial or Edwardian building, it is part of Subiaco's latter day heritage and worthy of retention.

#### Landscape Setting (Refer Figures L1 & L2)

The site chosen for the Civic Hall was the south-east corner of the area known as 'Rankin Gardens', bordered by Hamersley, Hensman, Bagot and Rokeby roads.

Observation of the 1948 aerial photograph shows the building site to be a relatively open space within otherwise densely treed, parkland landscape.

An undated photograph, apparently taken soon after the completion of the building, shows the Civic Hall set in a cleared space, with a wide, straight path leading from Hamersley Road to the front entrance.<sup>16</sup> There is a large Banksia tree in the foreground south-east of the building and a large tree (possibly Jarrah) behind it. The ground in front of the building is roughly finished with no apparent sign of gardens or planting.

The 1959 aerial photograph shows that the building has been sited and constructed with a minimum of disturbance to the surrounding landscape. A wide straight path from Hamersley Road to the port cochere is clearly revealed, as is a driveway which curves in to the port cochere from opposite Union Street and returns to Hamersley Road near its intersection with Hensman Road. Straight narrow paths, which also appear in the 1948 aerial photograph, cut through the gardens from Hamersley and Hensman Roads to Bagot Road. The area bounded by the driveway in front of the Civic Hall appears dark and even, consistent with lawn. There is regular planting of small trees and shrubs east of the straight entry path and garden beds run along its western edge. Large trees have been retained close to the path.

Despite the earlier reference to prominent Perth landscape architect, John Oldham, being retained for the project, a landscape plan has not yet been located.

A special nursery to supply the 'City Hall' gardens was established at the rear of the Bagot Road Police Station and a well was sunk in 1960 so that,

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<sup>13</sup> Framed certificate, surrounded by 20 one-dollar coins, in Subiaco Museum.

<sup>14</sup> 'Subiaco Heritage Trails' Perth, W.A. Heritage Committee, p.10.

<sup>15</sup> Spillman, Ken op cit., p.347.

<sup>16</sup> Battye Library Pictorial Collection, 1606.B1/3.



following the severe water restrictions of 1959 to 1960, the 'gardeners [could] continue the cultivation of the area.'

By 1964, Mayor Abrahams was able to remark that 'the City Hall Gardens excite congratulatory comments from both ratepayers and visitors alike. The provision of legible name plates for the various plants, shrubs and trees has earned favourable comment.'

In the same year, a combined effort by the local branches of two community organisations, Rotary and Apex, culminated in the creation of an 'attractive fountain' with changing water patterns and light sequences which was said to further enhance the attraction of the City Hall Gardens.<sup>17</sup>

The 1969 aerial photograph shows all well developed trees, lawn, garden beds and a network of paths covering the site. The carpark linking Hamersley and Bagot roads, which does not show on the 1959 aerial photograph, is in place and is lined with rows of trees. A round garden bed is situated west of the straight entry path and an oval garden bed is situated at the north-west of the site. The nursery behind Bagot Road Police Station also appears.

Between 1969 and the present, the main changes revealed in the aerial photographs are the replacement of the nursery by a lawn area integrated with the gardens, the growth of trees and the introduction of constructed landscape elements in the north-east area of the site.

An undated part plan of the gardens, shows the 'old' Council Nursery, pathways, trees, shrub beds, and the stream, pond and rockery behind the City Hall (refer Figure L.2). Some rose cultivars are also noted. In front of the City Hall, to the east of the straight entry path and connected to it by paving, a rose garden is shown surrounding a central circular feature which is not identified but which is graphically dissimilar to planting as it is shown elsewhere on the plan. Parallel shrub beds flank the main path, with rose cultivars noted for the eastern side. The inclusion of the nursery behind the Police Station and labelling of the building as 'Subiaco City Hall' indicate that the plan was prepared between 1969 and 1984.

### 13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* is a two-storey building located within the Subiaco City Square which is bounded by Bagot and Hamersley roads to the north and south and Hensman and Rokeby roads to the east and west. Designed by the office of F.G.B. Hawkins and Desmond Sands in the Post-War International Style, the rectangular building has a reinforced concrete structural frame with concrete floors, external cavity brick walls and a low pitched, corrugated asbestos roof.<sup>18</sup> The architect in charge of the project was Peter Parkinson. *Subiaco Theatre Centre* maintains an individual presence, surrounded by landscaped gardens and set apart from the other buildings within the civic precinct which include the council offices and chambers, the local library and *Subiaco Primary School* (1897).

The building is approached by a curved driveway from Hamersley Road which passes under the entrance canopy and provides direct access to the

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<sup>17</sup> Spillman, Ken op cit., p.285.

<sup>18</sup> Apperly, R. Irving, R., Reynolds, P. op. cit., pp.214-217.

ground floor. A second, pedestrian approach is located on the north side of the building giving access to the first floor via a concrete ramp.

*Subiaco Theatre Centre* was designed on a modular grid both horizontally and vertically. The application of this discipline, in this particular case based on the theories of Le Corbusier, produced a formality and consistency in expression throughout the building.<sup>19</sup> Externally, this is still evident, although the clarity has been diminished since construction through inappropriate landscaping and subsequent alterations to the fabric. Consistency in attention to design detail carried through to furniture and fittings which were selected by the architect.

The building extends in an east-west orientation with the elevations divided into bays by the expressed structure.

The structure was designed with a view to maximum economy and ease of maintenance. The main frame is in insitu reinforced concrete with insitu reinforced concrete slab floors.

The columns are at approximately 15 feet [4.5 metres] centres both ways in the undercroft. There is a 4 feet [1.2 metres] deep reinforced concrete ring beam all round the building at parapet level. The balcony beam is latticed steel truss of 60 feet [18 metres] span enclosed in concrete for fire protection.

All external stairs are in reinforced concrete. The canopy over the Porte Cochere is reinforced concrete carried on four tubular steel columns.

The roof construction consists of steel trusses of 60 feet [18 metres] span, carrying corrugated asbestos roofing with sisalation under. The fibrous plaster ceilings are suspended from this.

The external walls are of cavity brickwork in selected Cardup pastel bricks.<sup>20</sup>

External finishes include a painted, sand render to the structural frame, fairfaced brickwork, painted metal window frames and panels of unglazed terracotta tiles in the eastern end bays of the north and south elevation. Exposed mechanical ventilation equipment, a more recent intrusion, is clearly evident above the roof at the western end of the building.

Ground floor accommodation comprises an entrance foyer opening to both north and south sides of the building, with public toilets, the main staircase to the first floor and a brick enclosed stairwell to the Studio Theatre. A central zone contains service, sanitary and store room facilities. This zone continues vertically through the building although the logic has been compromised by alterations to the function of the place. The western half of the ground floor, originally an open undercroft, has a brick dividing wall along the east-west axis with partitioned, administrative offices for the Barking Gecko Theatre Company on the north and the Speech and Drama Centre to the south. External concrete staircases ascending to the first floor theatre level are located at the two corners of the western elevation.

The main stair from the ground floor foyer and ramp from the gardens to the north arrive at the main box office and foyer area for the theatres at first floor

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<sup>19</sup> The proportioning system developed by Le Corbusier based on mathematics and the human body, was first published in 1948 as *The Modulor. A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally applicable to Architecture and Mechanics*.

<sup>20</sup> *The Architect*, June 1958, p.26.

level. The principal theatre has been incorporated into the area once occupied by the Main Hall with dressing room facilities immediately behind in the location of the original stage. The volume of the Lesser Hall now accommodates the Studio Theatre. The upper flight of the main stair to the second floor has been removed with access provided by an external concrete stair and internal staircase against the north glazing. The second floor accommodation includes partitioned administrative offices for the Black Swan Theatre company and a rehearsal room.

In 1968, the first significant alterations to the building occurred when glazing was provided at the outer edge of the ground floor converting the formerly open undercroft to an enclosed "Supper Room". Drawings by the architects, Kenneth Broadhurst Ryan and Evans indicate that at the same time, the exterior of the building received general maintenance. Rendered surfaces and window and door frames were painted and deteriorating fabric was made good. Little was done to the upper floors, internally.

In 1984, the interior of the building was extensively remodelled. The adaptation was designed and documented by the Public Works Department of WA. The undercroft area was divided and partitioned, losing any sense of the original transparency of the building. More significantly, a 302 seat theatre with fixed, stepped seating, a control room and services for live theatrical performances was inserted into the shell of the main hall. The upper floor was enlarged and converted to administrative offices and a rehearsal room.

Since these major alterations in 1984, changes to the form and fabric of the building have included the addition of a concrete ramp for disabled access on the north side of the building in 1988. It is believed a fibre cement roof replaced the corrugated, asbestos sheeting which had become brittle in 1988.<sup>21</sup> In 1996, the theatre centre was painted and a new stair using timber treads from the original stair in the main hall was provided to give internal access to the second floor. The proliferation of mechanical and electrical service fittings that have been applied to the building and detract from the overall simplicity of the expression, have not been fully documented.

Late in 1996, the Subiaco Council with the support of the State Government commissioned a study on the viability and future use of the *Subiaco Theatre Centre* from Jones Coulter Young, Architects and Urban Designers. A heritage assessment was completed as part of the study.

The maintenance of the building is shared between the council, as owners responsible for the exterior, and the Perth Theatre Trust, as lessees responsible for the interior. Towards the end of 1996 the first programme of cleaning and maintenance since 1984 was implemented.<sup>22</sup> Still in progress, the programme has obscured some of the deteriorating fabric. Visually, the poor condition of the building fabric is exacerbated by inappropriate landscaping affecting the setting. To a large extent, these problems are reversible.

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<sup>21</sup> A memorandum from the Planning Office to the Town Planning Committee of the Subiaco City Council on 11 October 1988 outlines this proposal. The replacement of the roof has not been confirmed.

<sup>22</sup> *Subiaco Post* 26 October 1996, p.26.

### Landscape Setting (Refer Figure L3)

The Subiaco Theatre Gardens are at once, the setting for an important civic building and a public park.

On the Hamersley Road frontage of the building the curving bitumenised and kerbed driveway and wide, straight, slab path to the entrance provide the main structure of the landscape. The building is flanked to the east and west by groves of large, mature trees; those to the east shading the carpark and screening it from view. Along Hamersley Road and to the west of the building are groups and specimens of remnant native Jarrah and Marri trees, as well as a variety of introduced species.

A Jarrah tree has been retained with the entrance pathway. Circular rose beds are located in the lawns either side of the straight entry path which is lined by avenues of Blue Atlantic Cedar. A large, irregularly shaped shrub bed containing a mixture of species extends westward from the sub-station at the south-west corner of the building.

The east side of the building is flanked by a deep irregularly shaped bed of largely sub-tropical plants. A curving path forms the outer edge of this bed. To the west, a narrow, rectangular bed adjoins the building. This is planted with groundcover and two Pencil Pines, and is defined at its outer edge by a straight slab path. The garden at the rear of the building comprises a level, lawn area extending out to a moderately steep bank which accommodates the change of level between the building pad and the natural south-westerly sloping landform. The bank is grassed to the north and north-east. To the north-west it is densely planted with trees and shrubs, with rockeries and an artificial cascading stream which empties into an irregular, shallow pond at the base of the bank. A straight, slab pathway runs parallel to the building from its north west corner to the external steps and ramp, from which point it becomes an irregularly shaped, paved area. The space between the straight section of path and the building is planted with groundcover, Golden Pencil Pines and a Tree Strelitzia. The bed which wraps around the north-east corner of the building has a mixture of sub-tropical palms, a Golden Pencil Pine, Lavender and Rosemary. Trees in the lawn include Fig, Magnolia, Elm and Flame. East of the building are Jacaranda, Liquidambar and Umbrella trees in a straight line. The change in ground level and the surrounding trees combine to spatially enclose the area immediately north of the building.

The remaining gardens to the west and north comprise lawns, a rich variety of trees, shrubs and flowers and rose beds, playgrounds and seating areas. They are traversed by straight and curving pathways. The overall layout of trees and shrubs is irregular, while the rose and flower beds are in traditional, formal shapes.

The gardens in total are well maintained although a few individual constructed elements and plants are in poor or deteriorating condition.

The Subiaco Theatre Gardens are an attractive, well maintained, well used public park. Although unexceptional in terms of design, they contain a range of plants and constructed features and a cool, verdant environment that is valued by the public. The spatially enclosed area behind the building is particularly attractive and forms a subtly defined space which is useful for

outdoor functions associated with the building. The wide range of introduced trees and remnant native gums is of botanical interest. The rectilinear architectural patterns of the building are reflected in the original straight paths up to and around it, while the original retention of native trees and older plantings of large, introduced trees away from the building provide a counterpoint. More recent irregular pathways and plantings close to the building are visually disruptive and intrude on the carefully ordered geometry of the architecture and its otherwise simple setting. These intrusive elements could be removed without detriment to the parkland quality of the remainder of the gardens. (Refer Figure L3)

### **13.3 REFERENCES**

Bodycoat, R. 'Former Subiaco Civic Hall. Heritage Assessment' (for Jones Coulter Young, Architects & Urban Designers, WA, 1996).

### **13.4 FURTHER RESEARCH**

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