



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

His Majesty's Theatre building is a fine example of the Federation Free Classical style of architecture as applied to theatre construction. The place is significant in its eclectic use of diverse decorative classical elements, resulting in a rich visual and textural quality unrivalled in Australia. (Criterion 1.2)

His Majesty's Theatre defines the corner of King and Hay Streets and is a Perth landmark. (Criterion 1.3)

His Majesty's Theatre is recognised by the Perth City Council as an important element in the King Street precinct. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

His Majesty's Theatre demonstrates the ebullient decorative form and style favoured by successful developers within the central business district of Perth during the goldrush period. The building is identified as part of the architecture produced in Western Australia by the wealth of the goldrush. (Criterion 2.1)

As one of the first major restoration projects in Western Australia, *His Majesty's Theatre* has historic significance for its association with the development of public awareness of heritage and the development of conservation practice in the State. (Criterion 2.1)

His Majesty's Theatre has significance for the many international theatrical productions hosted in the theatre over the last seventy years. *His Majesty's Theatre* was the premier live theatrical venue for many years. (Criterion 2.2)

More recently, *His Majesty's Theatre* has a close association with the development of the West Australian Opera Company, the West Australian Arts Orchestra, the Western Australian Ballet Company and the Perth Theatre Trust. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

His Majesty's Theatre has social significance as the venue at which several generations of Western Australian have been introduced to live theatre, opera and ballet - a tradition which has been continued in recent times with the use of the place by local performing and international touring companies. (Criterion 4.1)

His Majesty's Theatre provides a sense of place, time and continuity to the community. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

His Majesty's Theatre has the most lavish and well executed ornamentation of any Federation Free Classical theatre building in Australia. The building is rare in Australia and the degree of ornamentation it exhibits is unrivalled. (Criterion 5.1)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

His Majesty's Theatre demonstrates Edwardian theatre architecture in its auditorium and stage design despite loss of some of the original stage features. (Criterion 6.1)

His Majesty's Theatre is representative of the ebullient goldrush architecture of Perth at the turn-of-the-century. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

His Majesty's Theatre is in excellent condition. Restoration in the 1970s and a program of regular maintenance has preserved the fabric of the building.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

His Majesty's Theatre was restored in 1977-1980. The restoration altered some of the original fabric of the building both by removing from the original fabric and adding to it. In addition, the main staircase was relocated and parts recycled and new parts added. Insertion of contemporary theatre technology and the reduction in the number of seats available for patrons has altered the original seating capacity and arrangements. Although this diminishes the authenticity of the fabric, in general, the integrity remains good as the restoration maintains the original intention and function of the major building - a grand theatre - intact, whilst providing modern amenities.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

During restoration of the building some major changes were made, with some parts of the building altered irrevocably. However, overall, the

building retains a reasonable degree of authenticity and the character and ambience of the Edwardian theatre has been conserved.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

His Majesty's Theatre is a four storey ornately decorated Edwardian hotel and theatre built in 1904. At the time of construction, Western Australia was experiencing the wealth, prosperity and security of a long running goldboom. Opulence, optimism, and confidence in the future of the state and the reign of a new king, Edward VII, heralded a baroque quality associated in architecture.¹ Freeland says:

In 1892, Perth had been a primitive frontier town with all the rawness and lack of style of a pioneer settlement. By 1900, it had been dipped boldly into a bucket of pure Victoriana and taken out, dripping plaster and spiked with towers and cupolas in a bewildering variety of shapes, to dry. *His Majesty's Theatre* surpasses any other in Australia for the lavishness of its ornamentation.²

His Majesty's Theatre was built for Perth businessman T. G. Molloy (son of a Pensioner Guard who had arrived in Western Australia in 1862) who was later to be the Mayor of Perth in 1908-9 and 1911-1912. In the 1890s, Molloy bought the interests of James Graves in various hotel ventures (in Fitzgerald Street and Hill Street) and built the Metropole Hotel in central Hay Street. He built the Royal Theatre next to the Metropole Hotel in 1897 and, as this proved very profitable, built *His Majesty's Theatre and Hotel*, in 1904, on the corner of King and Hay Streets. The total cost of the project was £46,000 - a substantial sum.³ The building alone, without the land, cost £43,000⁴ and when complete had a rateable value of nearly £2,000.⁵

His Majesty's Theatre was designed by the architect, William Wolf. Wolf was born in New York City and trained as an architect in Germany. He migrated to Australia in 1877 and worked in Melbourne and Sydney before setting up a successful practice in Perth in the mid 1890s. In designing *His Majesty's Theatre*, Wolf followed the proven style of the nineteenth century theatres of England and Europe and created a horseshoe shape for seating within the auditorium which brought the audience closer to the stage and improved sightlines and sound.

Within the theatre the auditorium was 23 metres by 21 metres, seating 2,584 people in its three tiers - 974 in the stalls, 540 in the dress circle and 1,074 in the 'family circle' and gallery combined. The stage, large by any standards, was 20 by 23 metres. The auditorium featured four artificial waterfalls and the dome of the roof was built to slide sideways to improve

¹ Beasley, M.U. 'Architectural Styles and their Sources in Western Australia since 1831' in Pitt-Morison, M. and White, J. (eds) *Western Towns and Buildings* (UWA Press, Nedlands, 1979) p. 211.

² Freeland, J. M. *Architecture in Australia: A History* (F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1968) p. 198.

³ Stannage, C. T. *The People of Perth. A Social History of Western Australia's Capital City* (Perth City Council, Perth, 1979) p. 224.

⁴ *His Majesty's Theatre, Perth Western Australia* (Perth Theatre Trust, Government Printer, n.d.)

⁵ Stannage, C.T. *op.cit.* p. 224.

ventilation so that on warm, fine nights the audience could sit under the stars.⁶

The builder of *His Majesty's Theatre*, Frederick Liebe, had come to Perth in 1896. He specialised in commercial developments and by 1904 had already built a number of office blocks, hotels, and banks in Perth. After building *His Majesty's Theatre* he would build the Art Gallery in Beaufort Street (1906)⁷ and the *Peninsula Hotel* in Maylands (1906).

The Theatre opened with a production of *The Forty Thieves* on 24 December 1904. According to the program notes for the opening performance, 'neither brains, money nor pains have been spared in erecting an edifice that would rank among the finest of its kind in the Commonwealth...'⁸

The new building presented an impressive sight in 1904. The *Western Mail* reported:

The massive grey walls are relieved with long rows of balconies and deep-set windows, and are set off with ornamental cement modelling of great variety of rich design. The Italian style of architecture has been followed. Two tiers of balconies, carried out in the Doric Order, run around the whole front, while the windows of the top floor have annexed to them balconettes which form a happy blend with the rest of the facade.⁹

Unfortunately, the two tiers of balconies were removed in 1947-1948, as the supporting pillars were considered a traffic hazard.¹⁰

His Majesty's Theatre has been the performing venue for artists as diverse as Nellie Melba, Pavlova, Jascha Heifetz, Sybil Thorndike, Vivien Leigh and Margot Fonteyn. Yet, by the 1970s, *His Majesty's Theatre* had fallen into disrepair and virtual disuse because of its outdated facilities. The new Perth Concert Hall (1973) was the favoured performing venue and there were plans to build a 2000 seat lyric theatre in the cultural centre. The Hotel was rundown and seedy and proposals were made to demolish *His Majesty's Theatre*; however, the building was still structurally sound and had potential for a long and useful life.

A vociferous public campaign persuaded the Government of Western Australia to buy and renovate the theatre in order to provide an adequate venue for local performing arts companies. Hotel space was given over to administrative and public spaces. A comprehensive program was undertaken under the supervision of Peter Parkinson and Robin McK. Campbell.¹¹ The restoration philosophy was summed up in a newspaper comment at the time, 'It's not a case of trying to revive a dead body...it's a

⁶ *His Majesty's Theatre, Perth Western Australia* (Perth Theatre Trust, Government Printer, n.d.)

⁷ Stannage, C.T. *op.cit.* p. 235.

⁸ quoted in *His Majesty's Theatre, Perth Western Australia* (Perth Theatre Trust, Government Printer, n.d.)

⁹ *loc.cit.*

¹⁰ *loc.cit.*

¹¹ Hibbs, T. *Conservation Case Study: His Majesty's Theatre* (Curtin University, Student Report: Architecture & Culture, n.d.) p. 15.

matter of rejuvenating a lady who has given this city a great deal of pleasure.¹²

When restoration was complete, the Perth Theatre Trust was formed, in February 1980, to promote the use of *His Majesty's Theatre* for a wide range of activities and as a regular venue for cultural activities such as the Festival of Perth.

In 1984, the RAIWA (WA) awarded the restoration of *His Majesty's Theatre* the Bronze medal, its highest architectural award.

In recent times, *His Majesty's Theatre* has been used to host the blockbuster musicals "Cats", "42nd Street", the Australian Opera "Voss" as well as regular performances by its resident companies: the West Australian Opera Company, the West Australian Arts Orchestra and the Western Australian Ballet Company. With this diversity of activity, some of which is permanently based at the place, *His Majesty's Theatre* has, in a sense, become a performing arts community in its own right and contributes strongly to the ongoing cultural development of Western Australia's performing arts.¹³

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

His Majesty's Theatre is a four-storey theatre and hotel building of load bearing brick with stucco ornamentation in the Federation Free Classical style.¹⁴

The building has a strongly modelled and embellished facade with a diversity of decorative elements that add to the lively and 'effervescent' quality of the facade.¹⁵ *His Majesty's Theatre* facade was altered significantly with the removal of the original balconies in 1947-1948, because the majority of the ornamentation on the facade is on the uppermost storey. As a result, the lower storeys are less ornamented as the original balconies would have hidden them. This means that there is a disparity in the degree of ornamentation on the facade between the upper and lower storeys: nevertheless, there are still a number of decorative features to excite the eye now that the balconies are removed, which make *His Majesty's Theatre* a richly diverse, textured building providing significant streetscape interest.

The Hay Street facade has a triangular pediment with a representation of Edward VII's coat of arms in the tympanum and the words *His Majesty's Theatre* underneath. The pediment is supported by four Corinthian pilasters that extend through three storeys, beginning at second floor level, to form three strongly modelled bays in the facade. On either side of the

¹² *West Australian* cited in Hibbs, T. *op.cit.* p. 16.

¹³ *His Majesty's Theatre, Perth Western Australia* (Perth Theatre Trust, Government Printer, n.d.)

¹⁴ 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. 104-107.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.107.

triangular pediment are two smaller arched pediments surmounted by lions seated facing away from the centre of the building. Balconettes are under windows at the top storey level. This is echoed on the King Street facade. At ground level at the Theatre entrance there are wrought iron entrance gates reminiscent of Covent Garden.

Internally, the Hotel was originally delineated from the Theatre by a corridor running beside the auditorium on the western side which led to the bedrooms on each floor. At the front of the building this then opened into a lobby for the hotel at ground floor level and corridor landings at the upper storeys. Within the front facade the corridor has open arches to the street facade and the corridors were probably used to effect ventilation for the interior rooms of the hotel as well as for the movement of hotel guests.

The Hotel facade echoed that of the Theatre but on a more modest scale. The arched and triangular arrangement of pediments are repeated but the triangular pediment is minor - the same size as the arched pediments. The arrangement of the balconettes is similar with a balconette also under the triangular pediment.

The lions at parapet level are also evident and face away from the centre of the building. This gives definition to the edges of both the theatre and hotel sections of the building and increases the richness of the ornamentation.

The theatre's main entrance in Hay Street originally opened into a tiled vestibule and onto a broad marble stairway. The stairs divided to meet in a spacious and highly ornamented foyer outside the dress circle.¹⁶ There was a bar on the left hand side of the main entrance.

The restoration which took place at the end of the 1970s, under the direction of Peter Parkinson, was intended to give the building a 1980s functional ability while retaining the original features. The restoration involved a number of changes including the removal and relocation of the stair case, the creation of a box office in the former bar area just inside the front door, refurbishment of fittings, new seating and the amalgamation of the Theatre and the Hotel to form accommodation for the performing companies and extra public space for the Theatre.

Inside the main entrance the central stairway was relocated to the right to allow a bigger foyer to be created. The new stairway now leads to the dress circle, gallery and theatre bars. It has new marble treads but incorporates the old balustrade. The Sportsman's bar on the left of the entrance has been converted to a box office.

Inside the auditorium, new stepped floors were installed throughout to improve sight lines and the pillars moved further back to give an unobstructed view of the stage from every seat. The number of seats was reduced from 2,584 to 1,240.

Within the original auditorium wall was created a new wall which excludes traffic noise. There was also a new ceiling, moulded in plaster to

¹⁶ *His Majesty's Theatre, Perth Western Australia* (Perth Theatre Trust, Government Printer, n.d.)

the original pressed metal pattern. The dome no longer slides open, but the original decoration has been reproduced as closely as possible from a contemporary photograph.

The proscenium arch has been made nearly two metres wider and is framed with mouldings taken from the pressed metal decoration of the original arch. It is topped by the same crown and a painting in a turn-of-the-century style by Sam Abercrombie and Jan Omerod to replace the two lost originals by Philip Goatcher. The raked stage has been replaced by a flat one and the old counterweight operated stage machinery has been replaced. New lighting has been installed throughout. The orchestra pit is deeper and larger but more flexible, as part of it can now be used for seating if required. The original pressed metal balcony box panels have been replaced by moulded plaster panels in the same design.

Wherever possible, the original fittings were reused. Those that were damaged were replaced, often in plaster moulded from the original; and where no decoration was present but seemed to be needed, it was moulded from appropriate examples elsewhere in the building. Where appropriate, the paint scheme replicated that of the original. In other areas, paint colours typical of the Edwardian period were used but with less vibrancy and in a simplified colour scheme.

In the former Hotel, the spaces were incorporated into those of the Theatre and the saloon and balcony bars were reconstructed using the original fittings and enlarged to provide facilities for theatre patrons. Administrative accommodation and new rehearsal rooms and dressing rooms for the Western Australian Opera and Ballet companies were incorporated. The other areas were opened up to create additional foyer and stairwell space for the relocated staircase, plus additional toilets for the refurbished theatre. In the basement is a new tavern and restaurant.

A new back-up building housing dressing and rehearsal rooms, and the air conditioning system for the complex was built to the south west corner of the site and is physically separate from the original building.

Disabled access was provided and deaf-assist sound loops installed throughout the auditorium. Air conditioning was provided to the original building and the new wing at the west. Fire detectors were installed and the former side entrance in King Street became a fire-escape.

In 1994 a section of the second floor foyer was enclosed to provide additional office accommodation. The work was carried out in consultation with the Heritage Council of Western Australia, to ensure that the provision of light fixtures, air conditioning ducts, services and communication and computer cabling caused the minimum of intrusion, and ensure the alterations have a minimal effect on the original fabric of the building.¹⁷

13.3 REFERENCES

His Majesty's Theatre, Perth Western Australia (Perth Theatre Trust, Government Printer, n.d.).

¹⁷ HCWA correspondence, November 1993.

Hibbs, T., 'Conservation Case Study: His Majesty's Theatre' (Curtin University, Student Report: Architecture & Culture, n.d.).

National Trust Assessment Exposition.

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