



# 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

*Sun Picture Gardens* contributes to the aesthetic qualities of Broome township, exhibiting characteristics of Broome's distinctive architecture in its cladding of corrugated iron, trellis work and timber verandah. (Criterion 1.3)

Together with *Tang Wei Cafe & Residence*, *Unwags Store (fmr)*, *Tacks Stores & Residence*, *Chinese Club Store & Residence* and *Ah Fat's Cottage*, it forms a significant streetscape on the west side of Carnarvon Street within the Chinatown Conservation Area, as identified by the National Trust of Australia (WA). (Criterion 1.4)

### 11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

*Sun Picture Gardens* is important as one of the oldest operating purpose built picture gardens in Australia. (Criterion 2.2)

### 11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

### 11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Since 1916, except for brief periods, *Sun Picture Gardens* has been an integral and distinctive part of Broome's social life, contributing greatly to the community's sense of place and identity. (Criterion 4.2)

## 12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

### 12.1. RARITY

Because of favourable climatic conditions in Western Australia picture gardens were once numerous and very popular. Since the sixties nearly all picture gardens have ceased regular screenings of films. (Criterion 5.1)

*Sun Picture Gardens* is a rare example of a purpose built picture garden still in commercial operation. (Criterion 5.2)

## **12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS**

*Sun Picture Gardens* is representative of the type of construction designed to suit the climatic conditions of the tropics, as evidenced by its high-pitched roof and raised timber floor. (Criterion 6.2)

## **12.3 CONDITION**

There is evidence of deterioration to some building fabric, which requires repair and in parts, replacement. However, the building is structurally sound, and overall the place is in good condition.

## **12.4 INTEGRITY**

*Sun Picture Gardens* retains its original function and has a high degree of integrity.

## **12.5 AUTHENTICITY**

Although minor additions have been carried out to the building interior, the additions are sympathetic to the form and fabric of the existing building. *Sun Picture Gardens* retains a high degree of authenticity.

## 13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

### 13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

*Sun Picture Gardens* is an half open-air, half-roofed, single-storey detached building constructed in 1916 to provide the local Broome community with a picture theatre facility. It was built for master pearler, Ted Hunter.

Europeans began their pearl shelling and pastoral activities around the Roebuck Bay area in the 1860s. Broome was named a township in 1892. As the pearling industry boomed, many hundreds of Malays, Chinese, Japanese came to the area or were brought in as indentured labour to live and work in Broome.

Amongst them were the Yamasaki family. They owned an emporium on what is now the *Sun Picture Gardens* site and imported Asian foodstuffs, clothing and household goods.

By 1916, master pearler Ted Hunter had purchased the Yamasaki site. He hired architect Claude Hawkes to plan the construction of a building which would be suitable for use as picture theatre, which also took into account the variable Broome climate.<sup>1</sup>

On Saturday, 9 December 1916, the *Sun Picture Gardens* opened. The opening night was described in the local newspaper as follows:

Mr E. H. Hunter must have considerable faith in the future of Broome, as he has just spent thousands of pounds in building a big picture drome and gardens, fitted out with the latest electric plant and picture-projecting machinery. The building (which is intended for wet-weather showing particularly), open gardens etc., were built under the direction of the Central Health Authorities, Perth, who expressed their entire approval of the plans, on which no expense has been spared. The roofed in portion has floor space 60ft x 60ft and the open garden 94ft x 65ft, so that over 1,500 people can be accommodated. The pictures are screened with the latest Powers Cameragraph, while the "screen" [flat iron, painted white] is a fixture and interference from the strongest wind is thus obviated. The strong electric lights announce, in bold letters, the entrance to the SUN PICTURES. Liberal use of mangrove mud provides an excellent approach to the premises. If the cry "fire!" were to be suddenly heard, the whole enclosure could be quietly, quickly and effectively cleared through the eight fire escapes. The opening night (Saturday) was greeted by a full house, many having to be turned away. On Sunday evening (with the permission of the Colonial Secretary) a show was given in aid of the Red Cross Funds, when the said funds benefited to the tune of £16.19s.7d.<sup>2</sup>

Broome had always had a multi-racial population and seating at *Sun Picture Gardens* was allocated strictly according to race. The segregated seating arrangements continued until 1967, when it became illegal to discriminate on the basis of race.

Prior to the opening of *Sun Picture Gardens* there were two picture show venues in Broome - at the Continental Gardens Hotel and at the Roebuck Bay Hotel. Both closed after an argument between the two managers and within two years *Sun Picture Gardens* became the sole picture theatre.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mann, M., *Reflections of the Sun, A Short History of the Sun Picture Gardens*, (Sun Pictures WA Pty Ltd, Broome, 1991), circa p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Nor-West Echo*, 16 December 1916, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Mann, p. 4.

*Sun Picture Gardens* changed hands in 1924 when it was purchased by Messrs W. H. Milner and L. R. Knight. Soon after buying the theatre, Milner and Knight created a moveable stage. This could be rolled from side to side on elevated tramlines to the front of the screen, and was used for school concerts and other forms of entertainment. In 1926, the bio-box equipment was upgraded by Milner and Knight. The stage ceased to be used in the early 1940s, when it was pulled behind the screen and converted to caretakers' quarters.

In 1933, Milner and Knight adapted their RCA projector for sound and the first talking movie was played in Broome to a packed house.

In 1940, Harry Milner died, and Knight returned to Perth, leaving the *Sun Picture Gardens* to Milner's widow, Catherine Milner, and son Jim. Catherine Milner carried on the business until forcibly evacuated two days before Japanese Zeros strafed Broome in March 1942. A caretaker was installed during the war years, although business was down as many of Broome's residents were either evacuated or left the town during the years 1942-46. In 1943, the army helped to install a more modern carbon arc projector into the *Sun Picture Garden's* bio box.<sup>4</sup>

In 1948, Jim Milner sold *Sun Picture Gardens* to a Mr and Mrs Anderson. Ownership changed again in 1953, the new owners leasing the business to J. and P. Haynes who managed the place for twenty eight years.

In 1970, Cyclone Eva hit Broome causing damage to the screen and lavatories.

By 1980, television had been introduced to Broome. It was quickly followed by the introduction of videos and the number of people attending the outdoor theatre dropped dramatically. As a result, in 1981, *Sun Picture Gardens* was closed.

Lord Alistair McAlpine, a British entrepreneur who owned substantial holdings in the Broome area, bought the *Sun Picture Gardens* in 1982 and its doors were opened again the following year. A succession of managers followed, the viability of the theatre not always proving certain.

In 1986, McAlpine sold *Sun Picture Gardens* and it was bought by the current owners, Anthony J. Hutchinson and Marisa Ferraz, in 1987. They had previously leased the theatre from McAlpine. The new owners commenced a conservation and renovation program. Included in the program was the establishment of the Sun Pictures International Film Society, in 1988, which has enabled the screening of films normally considered to be outside mainstream entertainment.<sup>5</sup>

In 1994, following a decline in the popularity of television and videos, and through the promotion and restoration of the building, there has been a resurgence in cinema attendances in Broome. *Sun Picture Gardens* is again a popular venue for movies, as well as for other events such as concerts, talent quests, cocktail parties and weddings.

## 13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, Mann, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, Mann, p. 21.

*Sun Picture Gardens* is a single-storey structure built at the building line on the west side of Carnarvon Street. Carnarvon Street forms the main street of Broome's Chinatown. *Sun Picture Gardens* is identified by the National Trust of Australia (WA) as contributing to one of three significant groups of buildings in the Chinatown Conservation Area. Together with *Tang Wei Cafe & Residence*, *Unwags Store (fmr)*, *Tacks Stores & Residence*, *Chinese Club Store & Residence* and *Ah Fat's Cottage*, it forms a significant streetscape on the west side of Carnarvon Street.

*Sun Picture Gardens*, with its lattice screens, timber verandah, and corrugated iron clad walls and roof, is typical of the building character of Carnarvon Street.

The theatre is a three-sided timber framed structure, clad with corrugated iron and with a high, twin-peaked roof. The fourth side of the building is completely open to the movie-screen and the elements.

The building is constructed with regard for the local conditions. Until 1974, when the Shire built a levee bank across the marsh, high tides would occasionally flood the streets of Chinatown.<sup>6</sup> Thus the timber floor is raised and supported on stumps. The high roof pitch is designed to reduce the amount of heat trapped in the building, and is typical of buildings designed for a tropical climate.

The street facade is protected by a verandah with a lean-to roof. The street facade has two recessed entrances. The southern recess forms the entrance to the theatre, via a foyer. The northern recess forms an entrance to an office, now used by the owners as commercial premises. The two entrances are separated by an enclosure that houses the theatre's bio-box. An illuminated sign, 'Sun Pictures', created with light globes crowns the building.

The interior, at the street facade, comprises a foyer, bio-box, kiosk and office. Original 'stalls' - four narrow, short steps, separate the foyer from the bio-box.

The foyer, upgraded by the current owners in 1987, is partially enclosed by a timber panelled and lattice screen and doubles as a small museum. Two old carbon arc projectors, that functioned in the theatre until 1989, are on display in the foyer. The walls of the foyer exhibit framed old photographs and old movie posters. The existing 1954 Cummins-Wilson Model G projector was updated with a Westrex soundhead, a xenon lamphouse and a single spool film transport system.

The interior space, with its ceiling fans, deck chair seating, and movie paraphernalia, exudes an 'old-world' ambience.

The expression of the building structure is immediately apparent on entering the interior of the main hall. The building has no ceiling and the roof timbers are visible. Radiating struts from the interior columns support the timber trussed roof structure, which is sheeted with iron. The internal leaf of the perimeter walls are unlined in parts, exposing the timber framing.

The theatre accommodates a seating capacity of about 500.<sup>7</sup> Canvas deck chairs are arranged in uninterrupted rows. Half the rows are set undercover

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, Mann, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, Mann, p. 4.

on the timber floor, and the remainder are set on a paved court (originally gravel) outdoors.<sup>8</sup> The movie-screen is located across a lawn setting which is surrounded by a tropical garden planted against the corrugated iron and lattice boundary fences.

Circa 1990, the old movie-screen was replaced, and a two-storey structure on stilts was added behind the screen. The structure houses a studio and bathroom, with toilets under.

In 1992, the existing office and kiosk were extended. A ticket box (c.1930) from the old Mareeba Theatre in Queensland was acquired and installed for use inside the entrance.<sup>9</sup>

The building is structurally sound but deterioration to some building fabric is evident. Some timber floors, the base of some of the timber columns, and some cladding material require repair or replacement.

### **13.3 REFERENCES**

Mann, M., *Reflections of The Sun: A Short History of the Sun Picture Gardens*, (Sun Pictures WA P/L, Broome, 1991).

National Trust Assessment Exposition, n.d.

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<sup>8</sup> Date the gravel area was paved is unknown.

<sup>9</sup> Mann, p. 20.