



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*

Astor Theatre is a fine example of Inter-war Art Deco design and has high aesthetic value, both internally and externally. (Criterion 1.1)

Astor Theatre demonstrates design excellence in its own right, and high innovation when it is considered that the place was substantially remodelled in 1939, significantly altering the fabric of the building. (Criterion 1.2)

The size, style and corner siting of *Astor Theatre* combine to provide a landmark quality to the area. (Criterion 1.3)

Astor Theatre combines with the Alexander and Beaucott Buildings opposite to form a significant streetscape. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Astor Theatre is illustrative of the resurgence of hope and prosperity between the Depression and World War Two. (Criterion 2.2)

Astor Theatre is closely associated with the Alexander family who were involved in the original construction of the place as well as its remodelling in Art Deco style. (Criterion 2.3)

Astor Theatre is closely associated with architect William Leighton, who designed many of Western Australia's cinemas during the 1930s. (Criterion 2.3)

11.3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11.4. SOCIAL VALUE

Astor Theatre is highly valued by the Mount Lawley community for its social associations as an entertainment venue, and by the general community for its aesthetic presentation as a fine example of Art Deco design. (Criterion 4.1)

* 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*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

The architecture and exuberant interior of *Astor Theatre* enhances the cinematic experience of the patron by helping to foster a sense of occasion and celebration. (Criterion 4.1)

Astor Theatre contributes to the local and wider community's sense of place as one of a group of art deco buildings on the Walcott-Beaufort Street intersection. The presence of *Astor Theatre* encourages patrons to avail themselves of the many cafes in the area, thus creating an entertainment and dining precinct valued by both the local and wider community. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Astor Theatre is representative of its class; that of Art Deco Cinema.
(Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

There are a few cracks in the terrazzo floor of the ground floor lobby and some cracking of the ceilings. Generally, however, the *Astor Theatre* is in good condition.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Integrity of the *Astor Theatre* is high. The original intention, that of cinema, is intact.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

The authenticity of the 1914 building is low. However, as a 1939 building, the authenticity is high as the main rooms - the auditorium, lobbies and stairs - are close to the original state.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Irene Ham-Sauman, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by John Loreck, Architect.

As indicated on the site plan, curtilage should extend to the kerb line of Beaufort and Walcott Streets, and to the north-west and north-east, to the outside of the external walls. Curtilage should also include Adrian Hair Design, the Globe Cafe, the arcade and the Straight Lace boutique.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Astor Theatre is a two-storey commercial building constructed in 1914/15, by Simon B. Alexander, to a design by David McClure.¹ Originally built in Federation Free Classical style, it was extensively renovated, in 1939, in the Inter-War Art Deco style to plans drawn by cinema architect William Leighton.² Further renovations were carried out in 1989, by Philip McAllister.

In 1900, John Robinson and Samuel Copley purchased the 720 acre Swan Location Z for £7,525.³ This land, which had originally been granted to Charles Bourne in December 1840, became the first Mount Lawley estate when John Robinson's son, Robert, took over his father's land holdings in 1905-06, and, with Samuel Copley, formed the Mount Lawley Estate Company.⁴ With the extension of a tramway from Perth to the corner of Walcott and Beaufort streets in 1906, the corner site became a prime commercial location in a developing middle-class suburb.

In August, 1914, Alexander purchased two adjoining lots, 427 and 428 on the corner of Walcott and Beaufort streets, Mount Lawley, from George Hiscox, a hotel keeper. Built to a design by architect David McClure, *Aston Theatre* was originally known as the 'Lyceum Theatre' and was designed for a mixture of vaudeville and lantern slide shows.⁵ There were shops on the lower level of the building.

Alexander had arrived in Western Australia from Sydney, in 1897. He owned the Donnybrook Freestone Quarries which provided much of the stone for Perth's commercial buildings. His quarries provided stone for the Perth Central Police Courts and the Police Station, both in Beaufort Street

¹ Note: *Astor Theatre* is referred to as '*Astor Theatre (fmr)*' in the Mt Lawley Group of places per HCWA correspondence. '(fmr)' has been deleted as being misleading. The name *Astor Theatre* was used on the real estate brochure for the May 1997 auction and is still on the building itself. However, the place is also referred to as *Astor Cinema*.

Note: The date given in HCWA file 2415 is 1911, but Alexander did not purchase the land until August 1914, as per certificates of title, so the date has been amended accordingly. No other information regarding date of construction has been located.

² 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, pp. 104-107 & 188-191.

³ Hamilton, Margaret *Mount Lawley: The first 150 years 1829-1979* Mount Lawley Society, 1979, p. 6.

⁴ *ibid*; Shearwood, G. & O. B. 'Original Crown Grants (1833-1844) and Localities within the City of Stirling. Perth, 1988' pp. 28-29; Hamilton, M, *op cit*, p. 6.

⁵ Article, 'Historic corner', no date or publication details (From Art Deco Society files.)

Northbridge, the Perth Medical and Health Department in Murray Street, and Perth Modern School, to name a few.⁶

Astor Theatre reflects the theatre and cinema history of Perth. Theatres began appearing in Perth in the 1890s and many were the venue for vaudeville shows and other live entertainment as well as picture or 'lantern slide' shows. Outdoor screenings of picture shows were held at recreation grounds, and Leederville and Perth Ovals were both holding regular summer shows by around 1911.⁷ That year, a report on works in hand in the *Western Australian Mining, Building and Engineering Journal* stated:

A number of picture theatres and gardens are being erected and others are spoken of...at Subiaco...in Murray Street...another in Fremantle. The city and suburbs will shortly be well supplied with this class of amusement.⁸

Cinema attendances soon completely outranked all other forms of entertainment. For the 1920/21 year, admissions to Australian cinemas totalled more than £68 million.

By 1922, the 'Lyceum Theatre' was advertising 'motion pictures and popular orchestra'.⁹ In the mid 1920s, with the development and popularity of silent movies, the 'Lyceum' was converted to a cinema, under the name 'State Theatre'.¹⁰ A vertical neon sign on top of the building proclaimed its modern approach.¹¹

The exact date of construction of the outdoor picture garden is not known, but is believed to be some time after the place was converted to a cinema. As the 'Lyceum', it was one of a number of parties that tendered to lease Perth Oval, in 1922, for the purpose of putting on outdoor 'cinematograph entertainment' in the summer months.¹² The tender was unsuccessful. Plans for a proposed picture garden, drawn by D. McClure, are undated and, according to Vyonne Geneve, 'early residents cannot recall evening shows before the early 1930s'.¹³

The entrance to the picture garden was situated on the Beaufort Street frontage to the north of the 'Lyceum', with a shop to the north of the entrance.¹⁴ The picture garden and shop occupied Lot 428. The facade was contiguous across the Beaufort Street frontage, presenting a harmonious street appeal.

Talking films were introduced in 1928, and cinemas were at their most popular between the First and Second World Wars. This period saw the erection of opulent and grand cinema houses. Film trade journals, giant

⁶ Stannage, C. T. *The People of Perth: A social history of Western Australia's capital city* Perth City Council, 1979, p. 235; Le Page, J. H. S. *Building a state: The story of the Public Works Department of Western Australia 1829-1985* Leederville, Water Authority of WA, 1986, pp. 376-381.

⁷ Perth City Council, File 205, 1911-1927.

⁸ *Western Australian Mining, Building and Engineering Journal* 1 July, 1911. p. 19.

⁹ Letter, on Lyceum Theatre letterhead, 14 October 1922, Perth City Council, File 205, 1911-1927.

¹⁰ Callaghan, Ruth, 'Cinema to get top billing at auction', *West Australian* 16 April, 1997, Property section.

¹¹ Photograph, 1938. Astor Cinema Grand Opening Souvenir Programme 26 July 1989. (From Art Deco Society files.)

¹² Letter, on Lyceum Theatre letterhead, op cit.

¹³ Geneve, Vyonne, 'Versions of Modernism in Western Australian Cinema Design 1930-1940' UWA, Master of Arts thesis, 1991. p. 144.

¹⁴ Metropolitan Sewerage, Perth Roads Board, Sheet No. 115, no date.

posters, newspaper advertising and cinema lobby displays kept the films and their stars constantly before the public.¹⁵

Cinemas took heavy financial losses during the depression, but once it was over there was a desire in the film industry to develop a new image and help people forget the bad times. In the mid 1930s, the second and third Mount Lawley estates were opened, following the closure of the old sanitary depot on the site now occupied by Mount Lawley High School and Edith Cowan University. The time was right for the 'State Theatre' to be modernised. William Thomas Leighton, leading cinema architect of the late 1930s, redesigned the 'State Theatre' in art deco style.

Art deco 'represented all that was new and modern at the time', and was 'seen to express the hopes and aspirations of a new generation, changed forever by the Great Depression and the First World War'.¹⁶ The style was named after the Paris Exhibition of 1925, and was 'influenced by European modern functionalism and American versions of art deco and streamline moderne'.¹⁷

William Leighton worked on a number of Western Australian cinemas including the Windsor in Nedlands, the Cygnet in South Perth, the Princess in Fremantle, and the Piccadilly Theatre & Arcade, Theatre Royal, Metro, Grand and Plaza Theatres in Perth, and the Lyric in Bunbury.¹⁸

The remodelling of the 'State Theatre' left it structurally intact but altered its appearance, 'dispensing with the arches and pediments and imposing a simple restrained facade'.¹⁹ The alterations included the entrance to the picture garden, and made provision for a grocery store on the corner, a millinery shop, and refreshments in the cinema vestibule.²⁰ The work was carried out by John Douglas Alexander, Simon Alexander's son. Simon Alexander had died in 1933, leaving his properties to his wife, Jane.²¹ John Alexander was also responsible for the Alexander Building, originally the Broadway Building, on the south-west corner of the Walcott-Beaufort Street intersection, and for refurbishing the Beaucott Building on the north-east corner.

The remodelled 'State Theatre' opened on 12 May 1939. It shared films with the Civic, in Beaufort Street, Inglewood, and together they advertised themselves as 'Perth's luxury theatres'.²² The place was known as the 'State Theatre' until 1941. An advertisement in the *West Australian*, on 28 June of that year, stated that 'in future the State will be known as the Astor Theatre, as we are not allowed to use the word State by a new act of parliament'.²³

15 Bell, Max, *Perth: A Cinema history* Sussex, The Book Guild, 1986, pp. 8-10.

16 Geneve, Yvonne, 'Art Deco in Beaufort Street', *Waltzing Moderne* Vol 7, No 2, March/April 1994, pp. 6-7.

17 Geneve, Yvonne, 'Versions of Modernism', op cit, p. 101.

18 *ibid.*

19 *ibid.*, p. 146.

20 William Leighton's drawing showing the facade changes to Astor Theatre. (with John Loreck's physical evidence)

21 DOLA Certificates of Title, Vol. 556 Fol. 198, Vol. 597 Fol 108.

22 Advertisement, *West Australian* 1 July 1939, p. 2. (From Art Deco Society files.)

23 Registration of Firms Act 1897, Amendment 1940, Assented 16 December 1940, Acts of the Parliament of Western Australia, July-Dec 1940, pp. 95-99; Advertisement, *West Australian* 28 June 1941, p. 15. (From Art Deco Society files.)

The name, Astor, was chosen by John Alexander's wife, after the theatre of that name in her home town, Townsville.²⁴ Following his mother's death, John Alexander acquired *Astor Theatre* in 1949.

The arrival of television to Perth in 1959, had disastrous effects on attendances, especially in the suburbs. Many suburban cinemas and picture gardens closed.²⁵ With the decline in cinema attendances in the 1950s and 1960s, *Astor Theatre* became a shadow of its former self, eventually reduced to showing pornographic films.²⁶

Cinema attendances began to increase again in the early 1970s.²⁷ While many suburban and city cinema sites have been redeveloped for other purposes, some older cinemas have been restored and, in more recent years, new suburban complexes have been opened.

John Alexander died in July 1978; his death ended a long family association with *Astor Theatre* that had spanned over sixty years. In December 1978, *Astor Theatre* was purchased by a group of Perth businessmen and families.²⁸ In the mid 1980s, the place was leased by Miriam and Howard Altman, who freshened the interior with paint and new carpets and provided continual movies at cheaper than city prices, as well as facilities for live stage productions, business seminars, and the like. But they found the long hours, and the amount of money needed to make *Astor Theatre* economically viable, too much for them and ended their lease in 1988.²⁹

With the place empty, rumours grew that *Astor Theatre* was to be demolished, but Ron Regan, from Sydney, arranged a five-year lease of *Astor Theatre* through his company Entrevision Pty Ltd, and set about giving the place modern amenities while restoring its art deco features.³⁰ Perth architect Philip McAllister was engaged to work on *Astor Theatre* and the Art Deco Society of WA (Inc), of which he is a member, was closely involved in the adaptation.

The work was carried out in two stages. The first stage involved restoration and upgrading of the seating, lighting, floor coverings and candy bars, with the finishing touch of an enhanced art deco colour scheme inside and out. In 1992, the twin cinema and extra projection room were added. After the adaptation, *Astor Theatre* contained a 106-seat cinema, a 698-seat auditorium with dress circle, a ground floor lounge and an area for functions. The complete restoration cost between \$550,000 and \$600,000.³¹

Astor Theatre was reopened on Wednesday 26 July 1989.

24 Geneve, Yvonne, 'Versions of Modernism', op cit, p. 244.

25 Bell, Max, op. cit., p. 126.

26 Wilshire, Trish, 'Cloud over Astor Theatre,' Newspaper article, no date or publication details. (From Art Deco Society files.)

27 Bell, Max, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

28 DOLA Certificate of Title, Vol. 566 Fol. 198, 597 Fol. 108, op cit, Vol. 1517 Fol 795 & 796.

29 Newspaper articles: Brindal, Ray, 'A New lease of life', no date or publication details; Wilshire, Trish, op cit; 'Double films give twice the value', *Weekly Advertiser* 16 June 1987. (From Art Deco Society files.)

30 'Astor friends unite: Demolition fears raised', Community newspaper article, 21 February 1989; Newspaper article 'Reprieve likely for Astor', no date or publication details. (From Art Deco Society files.)

31 Information supplied by Ron Regan to HCWA, 28 July 1989, Memo, HCWA File 2425.

A glittering guestlist turned out to admire the work of the architects and designers who had restored the grande dame of WA's theatre history to her former glory.³²

A retail arcade consisting of seven shops over an undercroft car park, was constructed on the site of the picture gardens in the early 1980s, by the current owners.³³

In 1993, Entrevision Pty Ltd, which also runs Cinema Paradiso in Northbridge, renewed its lease of *Astor Theatre* for a further ten years.³⁴ On 14 May 1997, *Astor Theatre* and the adjoining shopping arcade, was put up for auction but the place was passed in when bidding failed to reach the reserve price of \$3.08 million.³⁵ *Astor Theatre* remains a functioning cinema and appears to be under no threat.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Astor Theatre is located on the northern corner of the intersection of Beaufort and Walcott streets, Mount Lawley. Walcott Street is aligned north-west to south-east, and Beaufort Street is aligned south-south-west to north-north-east.

Across Beaufort Street to the east is the two-storeyed Beaucott Buildings which contain, from the corner, Drake Brockman First National Real Estate, Beaufort Liquor, Tony Pafumi Menswear, Simply Elegant and Michael Johnson and Co.

To the south, diagonally opposite the intersection, is the single storey Planet Video. Opposite Walcott Street to the south-west is the Alexander Building (1938) which contains, from the corner, Heart and Home and Swish and Chips.

At the west of *Astor Theatre* is a lane, beyond which is a small shopping centre.

North of the ground floor lobby, addressing Beaufort Street, is Adrian Hair Design, north of which is the Globe Cafe, an arcade and the Straight Lace boutique. The parapet that was once over the entrance to the arcade is no longer extant, but is still in place over Adrian Hair Design and the boutique. The entrance to the Picture Gardens was located where the arcade is now.

Astor Theatre was originally built in a Federation Free Classical Style, judging from plans of the 1938 remodelling, which documents extensive changes to the facade and interior to an Inter-War Art Deco Style. Interior alterations included the insertion of the dress circle, the demolition of the original staircase and the forming of the staircase present today. The 1938 facade is almost completely intact, and displays a vigorous, balanced use of horizontals and verticals and also the economic use of geometric ornamentation on otherwise unadorned surfaces. 'The Astor Theatre' is rendered on the Beaufort Street facade and a cantilevered awning runs the length of the building above the street. Internally, the remodelling is more ornate,

³² 'Astor unveiled', *Guardian Express* 1 August 1989, p. 17. (From Art Deco Society files.)

³³ Telephone conversation with Ron Regan, manager of Astor Theatre; Photographs, 31 October 1982, HCWA File 2425.

³⁴ Murphy, John, 'Art deco cinema to be auctioned', *Guardian Express* 29 April - 5 May 1997, p. 1. (From Art Deco Society files.)

³⁵ 'Astor priced at \$3.08m', *Guardian Express* 3 June 1997, p. 4.

presumably due to less structural restraints. To both the casual and professional observer, the building, internally and externally, appears to date from the 30s.

While *Astor Theatre* is essentially a corner building, the main elevation is on Beaufort Street. The main organising element in the Beaufort Street elevation is the expression of the two lobbies, one on the ground, the other on the first floor which are of equal width, one over the other and have the outside of Beaufort Street wall in the same plane. Pilasters, one to each side of the lobbies, rise from ground level up to the top of the high parapet wall, which is about two metres higher than the parapet wall to the south and three metres higher than the parapet wall to the north. Centred between the pilasters are three high narrow windows with circular accents over, and a series of seven square accents running horizontally below parapet height. Horizontal banding on the first floor, between the pilasters and narrow windows, is repeated beyond the piers and reinforces the horizontal design of the other first floor windows.

The second most important elevation, the corner elevation, is that viewed from diagonally across the intersection, outside Planet Video. On the ground floor, the corner shop, Jack the Lad, and the shop immediately north of it, the Langham Picture Framery, are articulated by the canopy overhead, which is similarly detailed to the canopy over the main entrance but slightly lower. On the first floor, on the corner wall, is a narrow window, over which, extending from the window head up to the parapet, are three red vertical painted stripes. The windows to the Walcott and Beaufort street walls to each side have domed elements similar to those above the first floor lobby. The parapet wall of the corner elevation terminates over the western end of the ground floor shops at a point corresponding to where, on the Alexander Building opposite, the transition is made from two stories to a single storey.

On the Walcott Street elevation, a modern utilitarian steel fire escape provides egress from the dress circle and the theatrette. This fire escape supersedes the original 1911 fire escape which was retained in the 1938 re-modelling. The original fire escape, which exits onto Beaufort Street immediately south of the entrance lobby, is still extant but currently used as a store.

The modern fire escape, the plain, unadorned walls of the auditorium and the fibre cement roof combine to give an overall effect which is somewhat rude and overscaled in contrast to the urbane frontages of the corner of the theatre, the Alexander Building and the Beaucott Building.

Internally, the layout is as follows:

Upon entering through one of the four pairs of glazed double doors, the visitor proceeds past illuminated showcases to the side walls of the lobby to a small ticket booth on the right. To the left of the ticket booth is a door that leads onto a short corridor with an office at the end. Opposite the ticket booth is a confectionary kiosk, and to the left of the ticket booth are stairs up to the first floor. Opposite the front doors at the back of the ground floor lobby, two pairs of double doors give access to the stalls in the main auditorium. Just before the doors to the auditorium are side doors, one to the left and one to the right, which lead respectively to the male and female toilets.

At the top of the stairs is the first floor lobby. At the back of the lobby a double door gives access to the dress circle of the main auditorium. To each side of the staircase are toilets, male to the auditorium side and female to the Beaufort Street side. A pair of double doors gives access from the lobby to an office, formerly the previously mentioned balcony. Opposite the staircase is a confectionary counter, and adjacent to the counter on the auditorium side is a door that leads on to the redundant fire escape. Adjacent to the redundant fire escape door are double doors which lead onto a corridor which angles to the left and into a small theatrette. A door in the south-west corner of the theatrette leads onto the steel fire escape.

Just before the change in direction of the corridor are two doors which are offset from the corridor and opposite one another. The door to the left leads to a staffroom with a shower, basin and toilet. A door in the corner leads on to a narrow, steel flight of stairs that connect lower down with the wider escape stairs from the theatrette. The door opposite the staffroom opens directly onto a flight of stairs up to two adjacent projection rooms or bio-boxes. The first projection room is for the theatrette and the second projection room, entered via the first, is for the main auditorium. To the north of the second projection room is a balcony that is not readily apparent from the street, and provided for the benefit of projectionists working in hot conditions.

The auditorium, ground and first floor lobbies and staircase are in good to excellent condition and fine examples of the Art Deco style. The wall planes are highly articulated with horizontal recessed banding, and ornate cornices. In the main auditorium large panels of open ornamental plaster work, about two by four and a half metres, serve as acoustic absorbers and air conditioning grills, while other panels of similar size are purely decorative.

All ceilings are highly directional, with the major and minor axis of the ceilings following, respectively, the long and short axis of the building. The decorative strips vary in width from the narrow pin stripes of about 100mm wide on the lobby ceilings to the two metre wide floral bands of the auditorium, punctuated by large geometric light fittings, and in the centre, a large recessed and decorative ceiling plane area which appears to facilitate ventilation.

In the early 1980s, seven shops over an undercroft car park were constructed on the picture gardens. The modifications of 1989 included the cleaning and making good of light fittings, painting of the interior and exterior and the provision of the new confectionary counters on the ground and first floor lobbies.

In 1992, the theatrette and extra projection room were added, the balcony enclosed to form an office and the toilets improved.

13.3 REFERENCES

No key references.

13.4 FURTHER RESEARCH
