



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

The intrinsic aesthetic characteristics of the original building complex of 1905 are obscured by the re-modelling of circa 1937, but taken into account with the documentary evidence of the former cast-iron verandahed state and particularly taking into account the remarkable interior ceiling and truss structure, the building complex provides an exceptionally interesting aesthetic experience of a provincial theatre. (Criterion 1.1)

The creative achievement of the auditorium interior and its streetscape contribution to Bunbury is of a relatively high order. (Criterion 1.2)

The auditorium is a landmark, provides well articulated and lively edges to the street spaces, and contributes to the characteristic urbanity of the nineteenth century, town centre precinct in which it sits. (Criterion 1.3)

The central Bunbury precinct is collectively formed by a number of one and two-storeyed buildings that are built to the street alignments, thereby creating an interplay between mass of buildings and perceptible street space, in which footpath verandahs form a transition between public and private spaces. With the formal, free-Classical *Bunbury Lotteries* and *Apex Houses*, the verandahed *Rose* and *Grand Central Hotels*, *Hands Building* and the moderne *Cronshaws Storee*, *Lyric Theatre (fmr)* complex is a principal element of the coherent precinctual qualities. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

It is one of a dense background of the free-Classical buildings that constitute a very high percentage of heritage places in the State and which collectively inform about the basic nature of this seminal phase of the State's evolution, and conversely, as a rare theatre and shops example, it informs of the diversity of cultural activities of its era and of the diversity of uses which the style was able to accommodate. It is a remarkable survivor of an Edwardian theatre in a state capable of reconstruction to this form, and as such could become again a rare, specialised theatre of international significance. (Criterion 2.1)

It celebrates in unique theatrical fashion the contemporaneous historic events, confidence and euphoria of gold boom prosperity, when immigration from

Britain and elsewhere brought with it the avant garde and popular cultural life of Britain at an accelerating pace. (Criterion 2.2)

The Art Deco remodelling phase of circa 1937 reflects the coincidence of the minor gold boom in Western Australia, that was consequent upon the rise in the world gold prices caused by the Great Depression, with the rise of cinema as a mass entertainment phenomenon. and it shares this background with the nearby *Cronshaws Store*, of similar "moderne"-ity. (Criterion 2.2)

The building is closely associated with the theatrical entrepreneur Hyam Weiss and cinema theatre architect W. T. Leighton whose lives and works the structure illuminates. (Criterion 2.3)

The auditorium ceiling and truss structures, and the internal Art Deco grillages are notable examples of their respective design ideas (of marriage of minimalist steel technology and timber craft on the one hand, and of the expression of Hispanic romantica and exotica with the plaster caster's craft on the other hand) and are important historical bench marks of such technical and creative endeavours. (Criterion 2.4)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

The existence of the building complex is a catalyst to the study of the history of theatre, architectural and decorative design, and of craftsmanship in the State, which might not occur in its absence. (Criterion 3.1)

The building complex of theatre and shops, in its form and history, contribute an essential component of the form and diversity of the City of Bunbury. (Criterion 3.2)

The technical innovations and achievements of the complex, in particular of the interiors and relationship of the interior functions to their external expression, are still of such relative quality to be exemplars for teaching of architectural, and construction principles. (Criterion 3.3)

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

The complex has the propensity to contribute to the local community's sense of place by virtue of its membership of a group of buildings that form a gathering place for the community, thereby contributing to that community's sense of cohesiveness. The community's consensus of value of this gathering place is evidenced by the City Council's main street rejuvenation project. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12.1. RARITY

The complex is a rare and endangered class of structure, the Edwardian legitimate theatre with shops, which exhibits substantially the authentic original elements in this particular case, whilst being an example of a major class of places of the cultural heritage of Western Australia. (Criterion 5.1)

The theatre illustrates the distinctive cultural amenity of the small community theatre that survives only as a consequence of deliberate community effort and which is commercially endangered by other entertainment technologies. (Criterion 5.2)

12.2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

The complex is representative of the Edwardian legitimate theatre and of the phenomenon of conversion of such earlier legitimate theatres to cinema, and of the more effervescent versions of the free-Classical architecture (typical of Western Australia's gold boom period) as particularly found in the theatrical class of places. (Criterion 6.1)

The complex is representative of the small legitimate theatre and cinema as principal forms of entertainment in Western Australia prior to the advent of television. (Criterion 6.2)

12.3 CONDITION

The current state of the building is good in relationship to aesthetic values in that they are readily perceptible in spite of structural deterioration and modifications. The historical and scientific values are not conditional on physical condition, and the condition can therefore be described as very good. The condition in relationship to social value is fair in that the value derives to a high degree from the propensity for revitalisation of the fabric.

The cumulative effects of management and environmental effects is that there is a range of relatively minor works required to restore aesthetic value to optimum degree, with a policy decision to be made in the context of future conservation planning with respect to the option to reconstruct the theatre front to the 1905 period of its history.

In addition a policy decision on whether to provide the resources and ongoing management structure for the recovery of the theatre function is one which is reliant on long term conservation planning and the will to do so.

Both such policy decision making and conservation planning are, of course, necessarily to be undertaken in the then prevailing commercial context and are matters to be undertaken by the owner, as may be, at the relevant time in the future.

Past management has detracted from the place primarily in the loss of the original theatre and 1905 period front, which can be seen from the documentary and physical evidence as a recoverable gem on par with the celebrated *His Majesty's Theatre* in Perth.

The current programme of management, albeit perhaps informal, of maintaining the structure for the purposes of the current furniture showroom use is sound and commendable, in that a commercial purpose has applied which has been responsible for the degree of intactness of the complex as it stands today, through economic circumstances that could easily have seen the structure lost, and in that the maximum degree of public accessibility to a private property has been maintained. It is virtually self evident that the current level of maintenance is the optimum sustainable for the current commercial use. A substantial case exists for conservation incentives of all types to be held available for the property.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

The original theatrical and specialty shops are substantially intact.

The use of the auditorium as a pair of showrooms has required very little alteration and is reversible.

The photographic documentary evidence of the 1905 phase, albeit obscure, is sufficient to permit an acceptable reconstruction of the Edwardian form which, aesthetically (both intrinsically and in terms of contribution of verandah and style to the streetscape) and historically may be considered to have priority over the retention of the evidence of the 1937 re-modelling subject to recording of the latter.

The likely long term viability of the place is moderate to high subject to appropriate incentives to the owner of the place to conserve the extant fabric and for a conservation plan for its future.

The time frame for any restorative process is variable within the fabric, the most pressing being the structural stability of the theatre front which has a time frame in the order of 5 years within which time it could become a matter for further stabilisation works.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

With the exception of minor modifications to detail of some fabric such as roof sheeting, shopfront frames, roof trusses for projection angles, etc., and despite insertions which are essentially reversible, the extant building fabric is virtually entirely and highly authentic to the principal significant phases of 1905 and 1937.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary and physical evidence has been compiled by Ian Molyneux, Architect.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Lyric Theatre (fmr) built in 1905 for Hyam ("Harry") Weiss and, including the reconstructed theatre front of 1937, is a two storey-scaled auditorium of brick construction, including foyers with flanking shops at the street-front, with a mezzanine balcony which was lately extended to form a first floor showroom by its present owner, Mr Bill Brown, and was built together with the pair of single storeyed shops of brick construction with stuccoed and painted parapet, in Victoria Street

Lot 192 is divided into two parts with a right of way excised at the western boundary serving both parts, and the auditorium covers virtually the whole of the northern part on the corner of Victoria and Symmons Streets. The shops abutt the auditorium for the majority of their depth

Both parts of Lot 192 are under the one effective ownership at time of assessment

In the 1900s, the Town of Bunbury, having been connected into the State's railway network and being the birthplace of the State's first Premier, John Forrest, received a favourable share of the prosperity engendered by the simultaneous and inseparable gold booms of the eastern goldfields and moves to statehood and federation. The new railway station was built one block away at Wellington Street and in the other direction the new harbour was being created to C.Y. O'Connor's second preferred design. The evidence of this prosperity could be seen in the two-storeyed verandahed hotels and commercial buildings spreading for two blocks each side of the Wellington Street transport arrivals focus, in the "main" street, Victoria Street, many of them being rebuilding of former simpler structures.

Among them, a demand for amusement provided the opportunity for the theatrical talents of immigrants to spread beyond drawing rooms and pub saloons.

Albert Weiss was born in 1900 in Bunbury, son of Hyam ("Harry") Weiss, a native of Manchester, who had migrated from the UK in the late 1890s.

Harry brought out all his brothers including Solomon, Benjamin and Albert (one other being lost at sea enroute). Despite Harry being a self taught musician, he and his brothers formed "The Bunbury Band", had uniforms made at premises next to the Rose Hotel (today, one of Cronshaws' drapery shops) and played up and down the streets of Bunbury. The band played every Sunday morning at the Recreation Ground, led by Harry on the clarinet. and they played on pleasure boat cruises of Leschenault Inlet from Bunbury Jetty .

Although his shops in the coal mining town of Collie were a financial disaster, Harry was an investor of many interests and provisioned and catered for ships, trading on Sunday mornings at the town jetty (accompanied by young Albert) which was a short walk from his shops.

Even then, for banking he had to resort to Perth, where he had a "decent account".

He had a shop next to the nearby Burlington Hotel and set his brothers up in elementary businesses such as watchmaking, ladies adornments, etc., under the sign "The Sailor's Friend".

According to his son Albert, his activities provided the only "cultural amenities" of the town of circa 1905. ¹

In 1903 Town Lot 192 was sold by the former Mayor of Bunbury, William Spencer, to Harry Weiss. ²

Harry commissioned the building of the legitimate, "*Lyric Theatre*" in 1904, namesake of the theatre in London where his mother had been a performer, together with the attached shops in Victoria Street on Lot 192.

The building was designed by Bunbury based architect FW Steere, the construction tender of £3,500 by J & H Gibbs was accepted, with completion of the building expected in early 1905.³ There was accommodation for scenery, and plays of all descriptions were produced. Harry and Albert formed a very popular black and white minstrel show. ⁴

The cast-iron verandahed street facade is evident in photographs of the town from circa 1910 to 1925 ⁵ and ⁶

Albert Weiss has stated, "I recall the front of the theatre was most imposing. One had to open two very imposing gates. A chemist was next door."

The theatre was put to a multitude of uses and skating was a particular success. The same issue of *The Southern Times* of Tuesday June 19 1910 that advertised for tenders for the adjacent temperance *Grand Central Hotel*, G. Nelson, manager, advertised a "Skating Boom" of three sessions daily. ⁷

The 1930's saw the rise of cinema in the south west and Benjamin Weiss took tours showing films on the silver screen, with nails in tins to add sound effects of rain, throughout the countryside. At the theatre Ben stood out in front of the screen and elucidated as far as he could the spirit of the film. ⁸

Nelson Bros' Goldfields Pictures Ltd. took over the theatre in 1936 and on April 3rd a fire caused extensive damage and controversy, necessitating a remodelling. ⁹

In 1937 the legitimate theatre was remodelled as a cinema theatre. This necessitated modification of some of the auditorium roof trusses, i.e., raising of the bottom chords, to provide clearance for the projection lines.

¹ Weiss, Albert. Personal comments to Ian Molyneux February 1996.

² National Trust Assessment Form and Exposition revised July 1982 (Geneve, V., et. al.).

³ *WAMBEJ*, 3 September 1904, p.20.

⁴ Weiss, Albert. Personal comments to Ian Molyneux February 1996.

⁵ *Bunbury W.A.* Folding Souvenir card in possession Mr. Ian Johnston. Fremantle. No date but the views include buildings from post 1910 to pre 1923.

⁶ *Visitors Guide to Beautiful Bunbury*. The Bunbury Herald Print, Bunbury. post 1916. Battye 994.1Bun.

⁷ *The Southern Times*. Tuesday, June 19, 1910.

⁸ Weiss, Albert. Personal comments to Ian Molyneux February 1996.

⁹ National Trust Assessment Form and Exposition revised July 1982 (Geneve, V., et. al.).

Remodelling of the street frontage of theatre shops and projection box above, together with application of decorative grillage to the arched windows of the mezzanine, and construction of a fibrous plaster proscenium arch, was designed by W.T. Leighton of the partnership, Baxter Cox and Leighton, architects. This was Leighton's first cinema project in Western Australia.¹⁰

The property, renamed 'The Furniture Store' was subsequently taken over by Mr W. L. ("Bill") Brown operating up to the present as Bill Brown & Co. Harry Weiss died in 1970.

In the 1980's Mr. Brown installed the staircase to the mezzanine floor, taken from the demolished Cottesloe picture theatre which once stood in Stirling highway corner of Leake Street in Peppermint Grove at the site of the former Boans, now Myers, department store, an ironic coincidence of the demise of cinema in the wake of television.

Mr. Brown is also responsible for the insertion of the first floor level within the auditorium, which serves as a second furniture showroom accessible to viewing by visitors. Some alterations to the backstage, backscreen areas were also made to provide for furniture deliveries to both floors.¹¹

Harry Weiss' son Albert, residing at the Salvation Army Nursing Home, Shenton Park in 1996, has provided most articulate and clear memories of the theatre. Harry's grandson, Albert's nephew, Alex Cohen is married to the well-known Perth actress Adele Cohen who knew Harry as "Pappy" and there is therefore a traceable line of theatrical oral transmission through at least 4 generations from Harry's mother to the present, in theatre in W.A., that would not be known except perhaps by research prompted by the building's existence.

Such transmissions are significant as being the means through which we know the historic modes of speech, etc. in theatre, from eras before the invention of sound recording, and this line contributes to the scientific (research) value of the Place through conveying a propensity to stimulating research.

The remodelling is associated with the prominent architect and cinematic theatre specialist, W.T. Leighton.

Harry Weiss' association has no doubt been lost to the average person through passage of time but the development of a history of the town would in all likelihood restore him to a position of some note.

W.T. Leighton's claims to fame have been revitalised by the activities of the Art Deco Society in W.A.

The documentary evidence of the former state of the place is of the common gold-boom arrangement of an Italianate or free-Classical facade draped with a curtain of decorative cast-iron verandah. This example includes a ventilation-louvred cupola of square plan-form, surmounted by cast iron crestings between finials above the entrance foyer.

The Italianate masonry facade which can be seen in simplified form at the Symmons Street side and in the pedimented shops in the Victoria Street front, formerly returned about the theatre front to the extent of the present Art Deco

¹⁰ ibid.

¹¹ Brown, William L., Personal comments to Ian Molyneux February 1996.

remodelling, with a pilastered parapet surmounted by obelisk topped cast cement urns, and at the centre by a raised pediment.

The pediment in the main facade was echoed by a pediment at the edge of the bull-nosed corrugated iron roof of a two-storeyed cast iron verandah, the verandah covering the full width of the street footpaths. The photographs are too obscure to permit certain identification of the cast-iron patterns but the ground floor verandah columns have deep valence brackets springing from capitals at approximately two-thirds of their height.

The verandah of the attached shops was of single storey skillion form supported on posts at the footpath edge, connecting to that of the *Grand Central Hotel*.

The steel entry gates in the foyer are missing.

The theatre auditorium is used as furniture showrooms, and the theatre-front and other adjacent speciality shops are used as such still.

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The building is a united complex of a two-storey-scaled auditorium divided by a late inserted first floor, together with a two-storeyed front of projection room above shops flanking the entrance foyer, with two specialty shops on the southern portion of the former undivided Town Lot on which the whole is sited, at the corner of Victoria and Symmons Streets.

The siting is within the town's "main" street that is subject to a rejuvenation programme being implemented by the City of Bunbury, and within a visually coherent precinct of buildings of one and two-storeyed scale from the gold-boom, turn-of-century era through to post-Depression gold revival era. The edge of the Victoria Street block within which the theatre sits is perhaps that part of the precinct which is most most densely packed with survivors of high authenticity from this period

The buildings on site are all of the same vintage, albeit obscured by later remodelling and also relate closely to the adjacent *Grand Central Hotel* from which it is separated chronologically by only 5 years and with which it creates a series of pedestrian spaces that could contribute to the mutual commercial viability (already part achieved by conservation of the hotel) through capture of passing trade.¹²

The style of the building complex is predominantly gold boom free -Classical, or Italianate, with the limited re-modelling of 1937 being Inter -War Art Deco.

The external form and style of the attached shops is that of a simple shed structure with symmetrical facade of glazed shop-fronts and cantilevered street footpath canopy. The canopy is of modern construction of differing dimensions to that on the theatre, and replaces the former post-supported verandah. The main facade wall which evidences the shops' age is surmounted by a pilastered parapet surmounted by damaged end finials that probably would have matched those obelisk-lidded cast cement urns on the main theatre parapet. The parapet is surmounted at the centre by a pediment

¹² Molyneux, Ian. "A Report of a Survey and Assessment of the Cultural Heritage of the "Old Grand Central Hotel at 83-89 Victoria Street, Bunbury" (to Heritage Council of W.A.) Fremantle 1991.

stilted on pilasters supported (flanked) by reduced scrolls. This too probably could be taken as evidence of the up-scaled, higher-stilted pediment and flanking scrolls of the centre pediment of the main theatre parapet.

The form of the auditorium is of a pitched-roofed shed with gabled ends, the eastern "front" end gable surmounted by a raised pediment.

This gable is clad by the bay of street-front foyer, flanking shops, and projection room that has been subjected to Art Deco remodelling

The western, rear end gable is clad by the backstage structure which has a skillion roof concealed within a stepped facade.

The extant free-Classical Symmons Street auditorium facade is divided into four main bays and one lesser bay, the latter including an ocular (circular) window over a pedimented escape door. This bay identifies the position internally of the staircase to the upper mezzanine balcony.

The bays are defined by pilasters unrelated to the spacings of the internal trusses, and the four main bays include large arched windows above, in two bays, pedimented exit doors.

Thus the building was well provided with emergency escapes from the perennial dreaded risk of theatre fires.

The Symmons Street facade is decorated with plinth, doorway pediments, arch molds and string molds in the free-Classical mode of the former, more showy front.

The exterior of the Art Deco remodelled front has a modern suspended and cantilevered canopy in place of the former cast-iron verandah. The shopfronts are typical nineteenth century form with recessed splayed entry doorways but generally evidencing various minor modifications of doors and frames

Above ground floor level the former Italianate walls have been filled and rendered smooth to create flat surfaces relieved by incised molding of the parapet and a central breastwork stepped timidly in the vertical and horizontal planes. A Chevron profiled panel sits in the centre of this work.

Presumed original window openings have been blinded with masonry infilling surmounted by ventilators for the projection box in the form of pierced decorations of pre-Columbian influences, perhaps via Miami, Florida.

The internal shop and auditorium layout and details are of large simple spaces notable for the exceptional, original, pitched, diagonal match-boarded auditorium ceilings with conical ventilator cowlings, supported on elegant trusses fabricated from rivetted rolled steel angles, and for the equally elegant cast-iron mezzanine balcony columns in the ground level.

The Art Deco cinema contributions internally include the remarkable plaster grillages to the balcony windows, balcony soffit decorations, mock lintol-frieze above the balcony entrance archway and (presumably) the louvred, light dampers to the external vent wall openings.

The alterations subsequent to the significant remodelling are commented on above as principally including installation of a salvaged staircase, insertion of the first floor showroom floor in the auditorium space, loss of the steel entry

gates and minor modifications of doorways, as well as the undated modern cantilevered footpath canopies.

The fibrous plaster proscenium arch has been cut about in the formation of new access into the new first floor formed by the upper floor showroom floor, but sufficient evidence remains for a reconstruction to the former details of the cinema remodelling phase.

The staircase salvaged from the Cottesloe theatre, whilst not authentic to the significant 1905 period details is compatible and with proper interpretation can be seen to have aesthetic and historic value in its own right and as a late and significant addition to the building.

The appearance and condition of the place is sound to good with the exception of some deterioration of paint coatings from time to time as they weather, and of some crazing of stucco surfaces.

A major problem is the apparent subsidence of the supporting steel pipe columns to the front facade, which may be a consequence of corrosion at the column bases, with the consequence that the facade is physically detached from the first floor return walls and exhibiting cracking in its plane in several places

13. 3 REFERENCES

- 1) Molyneux, Ian. *Bunbury National Estate Study 1978*. Nedlands 1978.
- 2) National Trust Assessment Exposition. 9 March 1981.(Molyneux, I. et.al.) revised July 1982 (Geneve, V., et. al.)