

# EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RECOMMENDATION TO THE HERITAGE COUNCIL

**NAME:** Palace Theatre

**LOCATION:** 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne

**FILE:** 603143, 10/009620

**HERMES NUMBER:** 2830

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RECOMMENDATION TO THE HERITAGE COUNCIL:**

- That the place or object NOT be included in the Heritage Register [Section 32 (1)(b)]

**Recommendation Date:** 22 November 2013

## EXTENT OF NOMINATION

The whole place known as the Palace Theatre.

## APPEAL TO EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S RECOMMENDATION

As Chair of the Save the Palace Theatre Committee, I Michael Raymond would like to make a submission in opposition to the recommendation made by the Executive Director (22 November 2013) regarding the building known as The Palace Theatre, 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne.

The Executive Director's recommendation to the Heritage Council advises that the place or object NOT be included in the Heritage Register [Section 32 (1)(b)]. It also identifies that "Information is largely from Lovell Chen, 'Heritage Appraisal, Palace Theatre, 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne', June 2013".<sup>1</sup>

Lovell Chen (Architects & Heritage Consultants), whilst an 'independent' establishment prepared the Heritage Appraisal for developer Sinclair Brook. Sinclair Brook was engaged by Jinshan Investment Group; a Chinese enterprise that purchased the Palace Theatre site in 2012 with the intention of developing it. Consequently the evaluation by Lovell Chen may well be weighted in favour of Jinshan Investment Group and if so could be seen as a conflict of interest.

Furthermore, Lovell Chen's appraisal does not satisfactorily address certain criteria from the Heritage of Victoria Criteria for Heritage Significance. It fails to sufficiently evidence and/or substantiate its declarations. Hence it lacks thoroughness and fails as a reliable source for informing a recommendation to the Heritage Council.

It is on this basis that this submission constitutes an objection towards the recommendation given by the Executive Director. It contains an evaluation of the Palace Theatre in respect to the Heritage of Victoria Criteria for Heritage Significance. Both the Executive Director's recommendation and Lovell Chen's heritage appraisal have been used as references in the evaluation.

We believe that the new information presented in this submission, in conjunction to that already at hand should be considered in a more comprehensive and independent appraisal. It would be advisable that such appraisal be conducted by an entirely independent body sourced by the Heritage Council of Victoria.

The Save the Palace Theatre Committee believes that the subject building meets all of the Heritage of Victoria Criteria for Heritage Significance. Thus this building warrants protection under the guidelines of the Heritage Register.

## ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The following assessment has been made against Heritage Council of Victoria (HERCON) criteria for the assessment of cultural significance.

### ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

#### ***Criterion A – Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria’s cultural history***

“In the 1850s, the influx of young male gold-seekers led to the demand for frivolous entertainment.”<sup>2</sup>

There were few purpose built theatres during the 1850’s and thus there was a limited choice of venues to host such proceedings. Consequently almost any available space would be used for theatre. Furthermore Melbourne’s culture of innovation and adaptability could be recognized to have been conceived around this time.

Throughout the decades these same ideas of innovation and adaptability have continued to shape the city into the marvellous and enviable place that it is today. Laneways turned eateries are now being replicated around the world, whilst urban renewal projects have delivered unique residential developments and communities. Bike share and car share programs continue to reflect the city’s adaptability, and central to this notion of ‘changing with the times’ is the Palace Theatre.

In the 19th Century, activities at the Palace site included boxing and wrestling, vaudeville performances and other entertainment. The 20th Century welcomed live theatre performances. The 1930’s embraced the advent of film and the building served as a cinema for some decades and was at one point acquired by Metro Goldwyn Mayer. The Palace later served as a place of religious assembly. The 1980’s saw it converted into a world class nightclub and restaurant. Since then, it has continued to affirm its status as one of Melbourne’s premier nightlife destinations and live entertainment venues.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst the Palace no longer operates as a live theatre, its dynamic past serves as a true reflection of Victorian adaptive, innovative and progressive culture.

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

#### ***Criterion B – Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria’s cultural history***

Bourke Street, Melbourne “was home to the city’s first permanent cinema and by 1913 had developed into Melbourne’s principal cinema precinct.”<sup>2</sup>

“The Palace Theatre has historical significance... being a now rare survivor of a theatre in the Bourke Street theatre precinct... Thirty-one cinemas are recorded in the ‘Cinema Index’ of the Cinema and Theatre Historical Society (1994) as having been in the strip at various times, few of which have survived, and no others dating from the early twentieth century.”<sup>3</sup>

The site has continued to serve as a place of entertainment since the late 1850s. As the only surviving theatre in that part of Bourke Street and in the absence of further information to demonstrate that there are other places used for entertainment over a similar period, this place can be recognised as a rare specimen for its unique contribution to early Melbourne theatre life.

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

**Criterion C – Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria’s cultural history**

The Bourke Street strip once reigned as Melbourne’s premier cinema and theatre district. The Palace Theatre is the last remaining theatre within the precinct and is an important landmark and visual tie to the past. **The theatre’s Edwardian interiors are the only remaining theatre interiors of its kind.**

The modifications that have been made to the interiors of the building reflect the nature of the state of Victoria’s forever changing industries and fashions. They also serve as a visual reference to Melbourne’s innovative and adaptive culture.

The last major modifications to the theatre took place in the 1980’s conversion into the Metro Nightclub. This change was welcomed with the advent of the modern discothèque and nightclubs. The Metro Nightclub became recognized as one of the most important nightclub venues in the world. It was the first venue in the world (outside of the UK and USA) to introduce video synchronization with a live performance, an aspect which has since come to form the basis of most DJ performances and musical acts.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the ‘80’s, 90’s and up until this day, the club has continued its run at the forefront of clubbing culture. It currently hosts one of Melbourne’s biggest club nights that features popular international musicians on a weekly basis. From the outset the Palace has played to some of the world’s biggest stars such as Kylie Minogue, Prince and Fatboy Slim. The Palace’s role in the development of Melbourne’s music scene and the city’s title as the ‘Live Music Capital’ of Australia has been instrumental.

The Metro Nightclub led massive security reforms in the 1980’s that saw bouncers retrained to “use tact and diplomacy”. The reforms also saw the introduction of female door staff in order to diffuse confrontation between revellers and security staff. This trend was consequently adopted nationwide and welcomed a significant reduction in nightclub violence.<sup>5</sup>

The Palace’s cultural history goes beyond the club scene. Other activities at the site of the Palace Theatre have included: vaudeville performances, boxing and wrestling. It served as artists’ studios and an arts school. It’s hosted fashion parades, moving pictures and live theatre. It has incorporated hotel facilities, a small shop and bar facilities whilst the basement has been used as a billiard saloon. A restaurant operated as part of the Metro Nightclub in the 1980’s after previously serving as a place of religious assembly.

The Palace Theatre may be seen as a time capsule that reflects Melbourne’s vibrant and varied cultures. Melbourne is Victoria’s premier city and the Palace Theatre has been at the centre of its sporting, entertainment, theatre, music, retail, arts, fashion, education, culinary and social cultures.

Finally, the Heritage Council of Victoria’s framework for Victorian Historical Themes clearly identifies that the Palace Theatre fulfils the following:<sup>6</sup>

**05 Building Victoria’s industries and workforce**

- 5.4 Exhibiting Victoria’s innovation and products
- 5.6 Entertaining and socialising
- 5.7 Catering for tourists
- 5.8 Working

**06 Building towns, cities and the Garden State**

- 6.2 Creating Melbourne
- 09 Shaping cultural and creative life**
- 9.2 Nurturing a vibrant arts scene
- 9.3 Achieving distinction in the arts
- 9.4 Creating popular culture

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

***Criterion D – importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places or objects***

With the advent of film in the 1930's many theatres underwent alterations to serve as cinemas. Consequently the terms cinema and theatre may be interchangeable. It was also common for theatres to incorporate hotel facilities and their function in a city was known to be varied. The theatre ultimately became a class of building that could be identified with constant change as it adapted to new fashions and technologies.

The Palace is now the last theatre that dates to the early 20th century in Melbourne's premier cinema precinct 'Bourke Hill'. Since its construction in 1912, the building has experienced several major alterations both internally and externally. While it no longer serves as a theatre and despite its myriad alterations, the building still closely resembles its original plan form and its Edwardian interiors remain largely intact. As such the building can be clearly identified for its former triumphs as a live theatre and cinema complex.

Perhaps the theatres most significant alteration occurred in 1986 when it was converted into a nightclub. This change would make it one of the first of a new, formally unrecognised, class of buildings; the theatre-turned-nightclub. Other buildings of this class include Billboard the Venue (originally the Total Theatre) (PROV H2329) in Russell Street which has served as a nightclub and live music venue since 1965, Hi-Fi Bar (originally a newsreel theatrette) (VHR H2250) on Swanston street which has been a live music venue since the 1990's, The Forum (VHR H438)(constructed as a cinema) which has been hosting live music since the 1990's and Trak, Toorak Road (built as a cinema) which now identifies itself as Melbourne's only 'super club'.<sup>10</sup>

This newer class of building represents a significant portion of large scale live music and nightclub venues. It plays a crucial role in the Victorian music industry by providing generous spaces for both social activity and professional performance. The technical capabilities of this class of building are of exceptional excellence and significantly exceed those of their smaller counterparts. Many have retained remnants of their former glory as theatre venues and thus can be admired for their juxtaposition of antiquity with the latest modern technologies in entertainment.

Ultimately the theatre-turned-nightclub is a celebration of culture and a true reflection of the nature of Victoria's theatres as objects of constant change. More broadly they represent Victoria's cultural identity as a place of innovation.

The Palace Theatre is an exemplary example of this class of building as it strives to retain some principal characteristics of its original cultural identity as a live theatre. As such it successfully represents both classes of building (20<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre, Theatre-turned-nightclub).

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

***Criterion E – importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics***

In 1911 architects Eaton & Bates and Nahum Barnet, were commissioned to design a new theatre for the site of 20-30 Bourke Street. The theatre opened in April 1912 and was of Edwardian style. In 1916 architect Henry W White designed changes to the theatre's interiors. These were of Louis Seize style. In 1923 the façade was altered for the first time and in 1954 it was completely remodelled into the Moderne style in accordance to designs by H Vivian Taylor. A refurbishment in 1986 by architectural firm Biltmoderne converted the Palace Theatre into the Metro Nightclub.

Despite the many alterations to the Palace Theatre, the building still closely resembles its original plan form and its original Edwardian interiors remain largely intact. It now displays features from the 1910s, 1920s, 1940s, 1950s, 1980s and later. While there is a great mix of styles, they remain distinct from one another. Each addition can be easily identified and associated to its relevant period and place in the theatres history. For example, the Moderne façade is a rare remnant of its style and as an external feature it has little bearing on the reception of the buildings interiors. Furthermore it is important in conveying the story of the venues role as a prominent cinema throughout the 1940's and '50's. The segregation of styles to different parts of the building, does not make the Palace theatre a chaotic mix of styles but rather, an ordered collection of rare architectural relics.

The Palace Theatre possesses an unparalleled, exciting and eclectic mix of architectural styles that include Edwardian, Louis Seize, Art Nouveau, Rococo, Neoclassic and Moderne features. While it is not a complete collection of one particular style, aspects of each prove to be rare existing elements of their respective style.

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

***Criterion F – importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period***

There have been several landmark periods in the Palace theatre's history. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the venue hosted live theatre performances. It was later converted into a picture theatre and acquired and operated under the guise of Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Finally in 1986 the theatre underwent its final and perhaps most significant conversion. It became the Metro Nightclub and was celebrated as one of the most advanced and impressive nightclubs in the world.

Network Ten's *Night Life* television program recorded events from the opening night of the Metro Nightclub. Host Molly Meldrum interviewed iconic industry people and celebrities including Michael Gudinski, one of the nation's most prominent promoters, and leading figures alike. Some comments in respect to the new nightclub included:<sup>4</sup>

*"The biggest club in L.A. is Vertigos and it is nowhere near this. This is really fabulous, I mean I've never seen anything like this, I've lived in London, I've lived in Europe, everywhere! And this is amazing!"*

*"This has got to be more special than any other place I've seen over there [London, New York, Overseas] that's for sure"*

*"If this was in New York it would be the toast of the world"*

The venue's continued excellence over the course of its history may be reflected in the money that has been invested into it over the years. Often, amounts invested in refurbishments and technical upgrades have exceeded the value of the building itself. The 1916 alterations to the building cost £20,000 while the original building tender price was only £17,256. More than \$10 million was invested in the theatre's 1986 conversion while more than twenty years later in 2007 the building resold for just \$9.8 million.<sup>7</sup>

The Palace Theatre's conversion into the Metro Nightclub saw it become perhaps the most advanced nightclub in the world and certainly the biggest nightclub in the Southern Hemisphere. It embellished the latest technology in both artistic performance and night club operation performance. Most notable was its incorporation of video visualisations with a live music performance. The Metro became the first nightclub outside of the USA and UK that was technically capable of synchronising videos with a DJ performance. This visual element is something which now forms the basis of almost every DJ performance world-wide.

The Palace (Metro Nightclub) has continued its reign as a postmodern club leading security reforms in the 1980's whilst today it is bringing Ibiza and international styled performances to clubbing in Australia for the very first time. The venue's ability to cater to such performances can be credited to its physical attributes as a former theatre.

The stage allows the venue to play host to live performances that other venues simply cannot cater for. This includes bands and accompanying visual elements. The ability to accommodate a diverse range of acts and performance types, combined with the venue's technological capabilities, has allowed it to play host to many of the world's most successful musicians, DJ's and entertainers including James Brown, Fatboy Slim, Duran Duran, Prince and The Killers.

Today the Palace Theatre continues to operate as a successful nightclub and live music venue. It owns bragging rights, having hosted artists that its interstate counterparts could only dream of hosting. The unprecedented level of excellence in nightclub design and function has been continued since opening in 1986. Thus the building's most recent use may be seen as its most significant creative and technical achievements.

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

***Criterion G – strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to indigenous peoples as part of their continuing and developing cultural traditions.***

Guidelines to the *Burra Charter* identify places of entertainment as some of the most common places of 'social value'. This is commonly as a result of the place being used for 'meeting' or 'resort' or for the place having been associated with significant events, or for having special meaning for a particular interest group/s.<sup>42</sup>

Lovell Chen's heritage appraisal in relation to the Palace Theatre identifies the place as "a focus of cultural sentiment" and a place of social significance. However it argues that "the attribution of a level of social significance to the Palace Theatre could arguably be said to be true of any publicly visitable building which functions as a 'container' for social interaction and experience, such as a theatre, cinema, nightclub or restaurant." While there may be some merit in the observations noted in the evaluation, it fails to recognise the excellence of the Palace Theatre which propels it ahead of its counterparts.

Other significant music venues in Melbourne include The Forum Theatre, Festival Hall, Billboard the Venue, The HiFi Bar and Ballroom, and The Sidney Myer Music Bowl. Few of these venues can cater for crowds or artists of a similar scale or stature as the Palace Theatre. The very nature of the Palace as a former theatre means that it has the necessary staging infrastructure to host live bands and DJs that may be accompanied by elaborate 'set-ups'. These might include musical instruments and/or visual components such as LED screens and lighting. In essence the stage facilities can accommodate full stage productions.

Beyond the technical capabilities of the Palace Theatre, its expansive dance-floor and balconies provide unparalleled levels of patron comfort by limiting over-crowding and by promoting visibility to the stage from all angles throughout the building.

It is for the aforementioned reasons that the Palace Theatre is of particular importance to special interest groups. Namely the trance/dance music and rock music communities whose acts frequently require such spaces for staging and musical equipment. It is for these same reasons that The Palace Theatre bares such uniqueness and thus is a vital component of Victoria's music industry.

Lovell Chen's heritage appraisal in relation to the Palace Theatre declares that the Palace Theatre reopened as a nightclub in 1986 and that live music performances only commenced in 2007 when it came under new management. However these observations made by Lovell Chen are inaccurate. They state that therefore the Palace Theatre's role in the development of Melbourne's music industry has been insignificant. They fail to recognise however that whilst the theatre did operate as a nightclub it did still play host to live musical acts. Such acts included Duran Duran, James Brown and Prince. Accordingly the Palace Theatre's history as a venue for live music in fact extends on from the 1980's rather than from 2007 as was previously suggested.

Throughout the duration of its history as a live music venue, the Palace Theatre has witnessed the closure of many of its interstate equivalents; thus leaving those respective states without the necessary facilities to support many musical acts. As a place that caters for a very specific market patrons are known to travel from as far as Adelaide, country New South Wales and Tasmania to attend shows at the Palace Theatre. Furthermore, these special interest groups with an association to the Palace Theatre are widespread across the nation.

A 'Save the Palace' community group has emerged and has acquired over 31,000 'followers' through their 'Save the Palace Theatre Melbourne' Facebook page. An online petition has subsequently obtained over 25,000 'signatures' and a public protest which was held outside Parliament House on October 12, 2013 was attended by over one thousand people. The cause has been received broadly with many of the online petitioners residing interstate and even internationally. Additionally a '#savethepalace' placard campaign rallied the support of industry figures that included both local and international artists. The widespread outrage in response to the potential loss of the Palace Theatre demonstrates that this is an issue greater than just local significance whilst the sheer volume of support behind 'saving' the venue highlights that it is a building of special importance to not just one, but several particular communities.

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

***Criterion H –Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance to Victoria’s history.***

“between 1919 and c1922 the artist Sir Arthur Streeton (1867-1943) and the artist and teacher Max Meldrum (1875-1955) had their painting studios there, and Meldrum conducted his art school, teaching such artists as Clarice Beckett, Percy Leason and Arnold Shore.” Streeton and Meldrum were pioneers of the Australian Tonalism movement. In 1939 and 1940 Meldrum was awarded the Archibald Prize for portraiture; now one of Australia’s most valuable arts prizes. In 2005 Streeton’s 1890 painting, Sunlight Sweet, Coogee, was sold for \$2.04 million (only the second painting by an Australian artist to exceed AUD\$2 million).<sup>8,9</sup>

The stage production of ‘Hair’ by Harry M Miller ran at the Palace Theatre in the 1970s.

The array of alterations made to the Palace Theatre building has consistently been carried out by esteemed architects and designers. The most recent refit was designed by prominent and distinguished Australian architects Randal Marsh and Roger Wood under the guise of Biltmoderne in 1986.

The Palace Theatre is thus considered to meet this criterion.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Palace Theatre has operated as a premier entertainment destination for the best part of the last 100 years and has asserted itself as one of the city’s most popular entertainment venues. As such the building is of much value to Melbourne’s entertainment culture and retains a high degree of social significance to the community. It’s most recent use has probably been its most significant and successful use and despite its relatively short duration (just falling short of 30 years), its contribution to the fabric of the city on cultural grounds has been exemplary.

The building has undergone numerous alterations throughout its history. The most notable being the Moderne façade treatment in 1952 and the internal reconfiguration to a nightclub in 1986. While the alterations were extensive the building has retained strong elements from the original built form both internally and externally. Whilst it is not a complete collection of remnants from any particular period, the building is an eclectic mix of styles which together tell a story of the place’s vibrant history and rich culture.

The building is of particular interest to numerous minority and several majority groups. These groups are concerned mainly with music entertainment and culture. As the Palace Theatre is one of very few venues that can cater to the needs of these communities, the loss of such a venue would be detrimental, not only to the immediate interest groups but to the broader community.

Lovell Chen’s heritage appraisal also presents extensive information that would suggest that the Palace Theatre is worthy of Heritage Significance. Yet, despite their findings they insist that they don’t believe that the building meets the criteria for Heritage Significance.

This assessment concludes that the Palace Theatre building is of both local and of Heritage Significance. The Heritage Council of Victoria should thus conduct a subsequent and more rigorous investigation into the significance of the Palace Theatre. It is for the reasons outlined in this document that we believe the Palace Theatre at 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne should be included in the Victorian Heritage Register.



## KEY REFERENCES

1. 'Assessment Of Cultural Heritage Significance & Executive Director Recommendation To The Heritage Council' (<http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/heritage/victorian-heritage-register/registration/current-recommendations-open-for-comment>)
2. 'A short history of the Australian theatre to 1910', ([www.hat-archive.com/shorthistory.htm](http://www.hat-archive.com/shorthistory.htm)) (History of Australian Theatre Archive)
3. Lovell Chen, 'Heritage Appraisal, Palace Theatre, 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne', June 2013 ([www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/.../Palace-Theatre.pdf](http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/.../Palace-Theatre.pdf))
4. "Metro Nightclub Opening Part 3 of 3" as seen on Night Life, Network Ten ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9A1QeJhV\\_CI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9A1QeJhV_CI))
5. "Melbourne Metro Nightclub on SBS TV Dateline" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kpITsJUkHI>)
6. Victoria Framework Historical Themes ( <http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/heritage-themes/>)
7. 'New City Theatre. Interior cost, £20,000', Argus, 2 November 1916, p. 10.
8. Joyce McGrath & Bernard Smith, 'Duncan Max Meldrum', Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 10, 1986.
9. Ann E. Galbally, 'Streeton, 'Sir Arthur Ernest', Australian Dictionary of Biography (<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/streeton-sir-arthur-ernest-8697>)
10. Heritage Victoria, 'H0653 Forum and Rapallo Cinemas', Victorian Heritage Register citation, [http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/#detail\\_places;753](http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/#detail_places;753)