

ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RECOMMENDATION TO THE HERITAGE COUNCIL

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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.



BRIEF SUMMARY OF HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

History Summary

The site of the Palace Theatre was occupied from the late 1850s until the early twentieth century by the Excelsior Hotel. The association between hotels and theatres at the time was close, and the hotel incorporated a hall (known as the Queen's Hall) used for vaudeville performances and other entertainment, including boxing and wrestling. In 1911 the Sydney-based architects Eaton & Bates, in association with the Melbourne architect Nahum Barnet, were commissioned to design a new theatre for the site, which opened in April 1912. It had seating on three levels and incorporated a hotel (the Pastoral Hotel) with a bar on the ground floor and bedrooms on the first floor. In 1916 the Sydney architect Henry W White designed alterations, which involved a refitting of the auditorium and lobby with the addition of plaster decoration in a *Louis Seize* style. Between 1919 and c1922 the front room on the upper level was let for use as a studio to the prominent artists Arthur Streeton and Max Meldrum. In 1920 a four level dressing room block was added at the rear of the building. In 1923 the facade was altered to allow for the opening up of a dress circle foyer. A foyer for the upper circle was added in 1940. A new facade in a Moderne style designed by H Vivian Taylor was added in 1954. In the 1950s the interior was altered further, with the proscenium replaced and the theatre boxes and the balcony ends removed to allow the Cinemascope projection. A major refurbishment by the Melbourne architectural firm Biltmoderne was carried out in 1986 which transformed it into the Metro Nightclub. From 2007 it has been used as a live music and theatre venue.

Description Summary

The Palace Theatre is a three level brick building with a rendered Moderne style facade with a cantilever canopy on Bourke Street. The building has been continually altered since it was built in 1912, and now displays features from the 1910s, 1920s, 1940s, 1950s, 1980s and later. An entrance hall and foyer leads

into the auditorium, which has been greatly altered, with the installation of a level floor, the removal of the theatre seating and modifications to the original stage and balconies. It retains much of its original plan form, the two balconies and much of the 1916 plaster *Louis Seize* decoration, including the ceiling dome in the auditorium. The 1916 stairs from the entrance to the dress circle foyer remain, and the dress circle foyer retains original 1923 decorative features including the coffered ceiling, wall panelling and mouldings, and the 1916 leaded glass windows to Bourke Street. The upper circle foyer retains little apart from its 1940 ceiling. The staircase to the east of the building has treads of white marble and a fine dado of art nouveau style glazed tiling, which may date from the 1912 construction. The rear 1920 dressing room block remains.

RECOMMENDATION REASON

REASON FOR NOT RECOMMENDING INCLUSION IN THE VICTORIAN HERITAGE REGISTER

The Palace Theatre has historical, architectural and social significance at a local level but does not have sufficient cultural heritage value to be included in the Victorian Heritage Register.

The Palace Theatre has historical significance at a local level, being a now rare survivor of a theatre in the Bourke Street theatre precinct, once the focus of Melbourne's theatre and cinema life. 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. The place is of some historical significance for the continuing use of the site as a place of entertainment since the late 1850s, in two buildings: the Excelsior Hotel (incorporating Queen's Hall) which occupied the site from 1858-1911, and the present building since 1912. In the absence of further information to demonstrate that there are not other places used for entertainment over a similar period, this place does not meet the threshold for significance at a state level.

There are 28 purpose-built theatres and cinemas in the Victorian Heritage Register, located in Melbourne, its suburbs and country towns. It is usual for theatres to be continually upgraded and modified as the need arises, but the changes which have been made to the Palace Theatre have considerably diminished its architectural significance. Those theatres already included in the VHR are more intact, and therefore more architecturally significant examples of their kind. In Melbourne these include the Princess Theatre (1886, interior 1922, VHR H93), Her Majesty's Theatre (1886, interior 1934, VHR H641), the Comedy Theatre (1928, VHR H2273) and the Regent Theatre (1929, VHR H690). Theatres purpose-built for moving pictures include the Northcote Theatre (1911-12, VHR H22887), the Barkly Theatre at Footscray (1914, VHR H878), the Capitol Theatre in Swanston Street by Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin (1921-4, VHR H471) and the Forum and Rapallo in Flinders Street (1928, VHR H438). The Palace Theatre is an early example of a purpose built cinema in Melbourne, but the changes which have been made to the building mean that it is no longer a good demonstration of the form or function of an early cinema.

Social significance is difficult to demonstrate, but evidence for social significance at a local level has been demonstrated by the public reaction to the proposed demolition. A 'Save the Palace' protest rally outside Parliament House on 12 October 2013 was attended by more than a thousand people and an online petition has obtained over 25,000 'signatures'. However there are many live music and other entertainment venues in Victoria which would have similar social value.

RELEVANT INFORMATION

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUTHORITY: MELBOURNE

HERITAGE LISTING INFORMATION

Heritage Overlay: Yes (Precinct only: Bourke Street Hill HO500; no individual overlay)

Other listing: Classified by the National Trust at a Regional level (File B7115)

HISTORY

Contextual history

[Information from 'A short history of the Australian theatre to 1910', at

www.hat-archive.com/shorthistory.htm (History of Australian Theatre Archive)]

In Australia much of nineteenth century theatre was intended as entertainment for the working classes, and mostly consisted of pantomime, circus, minstrel shows or vaudeville. Theatre audiences in the 1840s were rowdy and poorly behaved, reinforcing the contemporary stereotype of theatre as an activity which encouraged immoral activity. But the middle classes saw theatre as a medium for education and intellectual stimulation, by which a morally uplifting message could be widely communicated, and supported the production of 'legitimate Theatre': opera, drama, morality plays and Shakespeare.

The first theatre in Victoria, called the Pavilion, was built in Melbourne in 1841, but a licence to operate it as a theatre was refused, and it was used for concerts and balls until a licence was granted in 1842. The building was unsound and 'knowledgeable patrons brought their own umbrellas to avoid getting wet'. The theatre was not well patronised and when the licence expired in 1843 it was not renewed.

The first respectable theatre, the Queen's Theatre, on the south-west corner of Queen and Little Bourke Streets, was licensed in 1843. Its owner, Councillor JT Smith had encouraged George Coppin, regarded as the father of Victorian Theatre, to come to Melbourne, and by the mid-1940s theatre had 'truly arrived' in the town.

While both popular and legitimate theatre increased in the 1850s, the influx of young male gold-seekers led to the demand for frivolous entertainment. This demand was met by a number of touring companies which performed in both Melbourne and regional Victoria and became a fixture in mining towns.

The audiences for popular and legitimate theatre in the northern hemisphere were quite distinct, with the working and lower classes preferring the former, and the middle and upper classes the latter. However in Australia there was considerable crossover, partly because of the more limited choices available, and also the lack of proper theatre buildings meant that both kinds of theatre were held in any available space.

Theatre became increasingly popular in the 1870s and 1880s, with a wide variety of performances offered and many new theatres built. By 1886 Melbourne had five major theatres, including the Princess, Alexandra, Royal, Bijou and one called the Opera House, as well as a range of other entertainment venues.

Moving pictures were introduced in the early twentieth century and rapidly became popular with the public. Many buildings constructed for live theatre were converted for showing movies, and many were used for both purposes. The theatre historian Ross Thorne has noted (*Picture Palace Architecture in Australia*, South Melbourne 1976, p3) that theatres and cinemas are very similar in form and that the separation into two building types is somewhat artificial. The accommodation provided in each is much the same, with the theatre stage used for a cinema screen, and the word theatre was often used to describe a cinema.

Bourke Street has played a significant role in Melbourne's cinema history. It was home to the city's first permanent cinema and by 1913 had developed into Melbourne's principal cinema precinct. Bourke Street remained a centre for cinema-goers until quite recently, but no cinemas are now operating in Bourke Street.

Place History

(Information is largely from Lovell Chen, 'Heritage Appraisal, Palace Theatre, 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne', June 2013, and from the Sands & McDougall Melbourne Directories.)

According to the *Sands & Kenny Melbourne Directory* the site of the Palace Theatre was occupied by 1857 by the National Hotel and from 1858 by the Excelsior Hotel, a substantial two-storey building with a mansard roof. The site was in the Bourke Street theatre district and incorporated a hall, known as the Queen's Hall. It was last listed in the *Sands & McDougall Directory* in 1911 when it may have been partly destroyed by fire.

1912 building

A notice in *Building* on 13 March 1911 stated that 'the old Queen's Hall in Bourke Street will be demolished to make way for a large picture theatre, to be built to the plans of Eaton & Bates of Sydney & Nahum Barnett of Melbourne'. On 12 August 1911 (p27) *Building* noted that these architects were building a new Variety Theatre in Bourke Street. The builder was W C Burne and the tender price was £17,256. The theatre opened in April 1912, and was variously known as the National Amphitheatre, Brennan's Amphitheatre (after the original owner James Brennan) or the National Theatre. It had seating on three levels: on the ground floor and on two horseshoe-shaped balconies with bow-fronted balcony rails, supported on slender columns. The building was purchased by Benjamin Fuller, the owner of the adjoining Princess Theatre.

The theatre incorporated a hotel, known as the Pastoral Hotel, a quite common combination in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The entrance to the upper circle of seating was from the footpath at the sides of the facade, and the remainder of the ground floor comprised the central theatre entrance, a small shop on one side and the hotel bar on the other. There were hotel bedrooms on the first floor along the Bourke Street frontage, and also in the adjoining premises, above the carriageway at 32 Bourke Street. The *Sands & McDougall Melbourne Directory* lists the building in 1913 as the National Theatre, in 1915 as Hoyts Pictures and the National Theatre, and from 1916 until 1930 as Fullers Pictures.

1916 alterations

In 1916 the owner engaged the Sydney Architect Henry E White, in association with the engineer Thomas Gurney, to make alterations to the building, which involved the almost total rebuilding of the interior. This cost £20,000, more than the original building. The shop, bar, entrance hall and upper circle stairs were retained, as well as the bedroom accommodation. There was a complete refitting of the auditorium, including the installation of fibrous plaster decoration in a *Louis Seize* style to the ceiling, walls, balcony and box fronts, the removal of many of the columns supporting the balcony, and the addition of internal stairs from the stalls to the dress circle. Access to the upper circle was still via the stairs leading directly from Bourke Street, and there was no internal public access between the two upper levels. From 1916 the basement was used as a billiard saloon.

At the front of the upper floor was a large room lit by a semi-circular window to Bourke Street and also by an openable roof. This was let separately, and between 1919 and c1922 the artist 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.

1920 alterations

In 1920 a four-level block by Henry E White and Thomas Gurney was added at the rear of the stage which contained dressing rooms, men's and women's lavatories and stairs.

1923 alterations

These included the construction of a new cantilever verandah on Bourke Street, the addition of a leaded glass dome to the ceiling of the stalls entrance hall, and the demolition of the first floor bedrooms to provide a dress circle foyer with additional toilet facilities and a buffet counter. These works necessitated the alteration of the existing facade, with the removal of the upper semi-circular window to provide a space for signage. In the upper room the openable roof was replaced with a fixed skylight, and the space became a rehearsal room and wardrobe storage area.

1940 alterations

In 1940 further works were carried out, designed by D F Cowell Ham, to what was now called the Apollo Theatre. These concentrated on the top floor: the large front room of the upper level was extended to make an upper circle foyer, with new metal-framed windows opening to Bourke Street. New seating was installed throughout the theatre, which was now used as a 'continuous picture house'.

1952 works

The theatre was leased by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer chain from 1942 and they purchased it in 1947. In 1952 the architect and acoustic consultant H Vivian Taylor designed a new facade with a new cantilever canopy, new entrance doors and showcases, new windows (using the old leadlights) for the dress circle foyer, a new entrance foyer ceiling, possible changes to the dado and balustrade of the main stairs and removal of the plaster decoration of the stalls and mezzanine foyers.

1954 works

Now known as the Metro Theatre or the Metro Bourke, H Vivian Taylor designed an extension of the stalls foyer into the adjacent shop.

1955 works

The auditorium was now reconfigured, to plans by Cowper, Murphy & Appleford, to allow for Cinemascope projection. This required the demolition of the proscenium and the installation of a new one (the old plaster decoration was reinstated above the new proscenium), the demolition of the theatre boxes, the truncation of the balcony ends, as well as patching of the auditorium plasterwork. The stage equipment was removed, a vinyl fascia was added to the stage front and timber veneer panelling was added on the side walls to dado height.

Subsequent works

The Metro remained largely unchanged and was used for film throughout the 1960s, but in 1971 it again became a live theatre venue with a production of 'Hair' by Harry M Miller, who continued to use it until 1974. From then until 1977 it operated as a cinema, known as the Palace Theatre. In 1980 it was sold and was used for services by the Melbourne Christian Revival Centre until 1986.

In 1986 a major refurbishment designed by Biltmoderne (a partnership of architects Randal Marsh, Dale Evans and Roger Wood) was carried out as part of the conversion to the Melbourne Metro Nightclub. This involved the refurbishment of foyer spaces, incorporating earlier fabric with a bold new industrial scheme, the removal of seating, the levelling of the stalls floor and the introduction of bar facilities in the auditorium and upper circle level. The balcony ends were removed and new stairs added to connect the three levels and a new timber dado replaced the 1955 one. Externally highly polished steel panels and mirrors were applied to the ground floor facade, disguising the openings to the basement and upper circle which flanked the main entrance. Over its 20 years of operation the Metro hosted many of the biggest names in music,

such as Duran Duran, Prince, James Brown, Fat Boy Slim, the Violent Femmes, You Am I and Hunters and Collectors.

In 2007 the place began to be used as a live music and theatre venue, operating as the Palace Theatre under the management of the former Palace Entertainment Complex in St Kilda. In 2010 the awning was reclad and a central skylight was added. The reflective finishes on the ground floor have been removed and the entrance doors are now off-centre.

VICTORIAN HISTORICAL THEMES

05 Building Victoria's industries and workforce

5.6 Entertaining and socialising

09 Shaping cultural and creative life

9.2 Nurturing a vibrant arts scene

9.4 Creating popular culture

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

[A detailed description of the interior spaces, their intactness and condition is given in Lovell Chen, 'Heritage Appraisal, Palace Theatre, 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne', June 2013.]

The Palace Theatre is a three-level brick building with a rendered Moderne style facade with a cantilever canopy on Bourke Street. The building has been continually altered since it was built in 1912, and now displays features from the 1910s, 1920s, 1940s, 1950s, 1980s and later. An entrance hall and foyer lead into the auditorium, which has been greatly altered, with the installation of a level floor, the removal of the theatre seating and modifications to the original stage and balconies. It retains much of its original plan form, the two balconies and much of the 1916 plaster *Louis Seize* decoration, including the ceiling dome in the auditorium. The 1916 stairs from the entrance to the dress circle foyer remain, and the dress circle foyer retains original 1923 decorative features including the coffered ceiling, wall panelling and mouldings, and the 1916 leaded glass windows to Bourke Street. The upper foyer retains little apart from its 1940 ceiling. The staircase to the east of the building has treads of white marble and a fine dado of art nouveau style glazed tiling, which may date from the 1912 construction. The 1920 dressing room block at the rear remains.

OBJECTS AND INTERIORS

There are no known significant objects associated with the place.

INTEGRITY/INTACTNESS

The theatre has been continually altered since its construction in 1912, and now displays features from various periods: mainly the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, 1950s and 1980s. The auditorium largely retains its original 1912 plan form, but the associated spaces and the decorative features have evolved over time (see 'History' above). The building now displays features from all of these periods, the most important of which are:

- the general interior form of the 1912 theatre with its three levels
- the 1916 *Louis Seize* plaster decoration in the auditorium, including the elaborate dome and the decorative panel above the proscenium
- the 1920 four-level dressing room block
- the 1923 dress circle foyer, the glass of the front windows of the dress circle foyer and the tiling of the walls in the eastern staircase

- the upper foyer of 1940
- the 1952 facade and canopy.

(October 2013)

CONDITION

The building is structurally sound. Most of the interiors are stable with some losses and/or damage. The 1916 applied plaster decoration mouldings in particular have suffered losses and/or damage. (October 2013)

COMPARISONS

There are 28 purpose-built theatres and cinemas in the Victorian Heritage Register, located in Melbourne, its suburbs and country towns. Some of these date from the nineteenth century, but many were twentieth-century structures more closely associated with the introduction of moving pictures in the twentieth century. As noted above there is little difference in form between theatres built for live performances and those built for movies.

It is usual for theatres to be continually upgraded and modified as the need arises, and the changes which have been made to the Palace Theatre have considerably diminished its architectural significance. Those theatres already included in the VHR are more intact, and therefore more architecturally significant, examples of their kind. In Melbourne these include the Princess Theatre (1886, interior 1922, VHR H93), Her Majesty's Theatre (1886, interior 1934, VHR H641), the Comedy Theatre (1928, VHR H2273) and the Regent Theatre (1929, VHR H690). Theatres constructed for moving pictures include the Northcote Theatre, 1911-12, VHR H22887), the Barkly Theatre at Footscray 91914, VHR H878), the Capitol Theatre in Swanston Street by Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin (1921-4, VHR H471), and the Forum and Rapallo in Flinders Street (1928, VHR H438). All of these are largely intact, and provide a much better understanding of the form of early theatres than does the Palace Theatre. The Palace Theatre is an early example of a purpose-built cinema in Melbourne, but the changes which have been made to the building mean that it is no longer a good demonstration of the form or function of an early cinema.

The Palace Theatre does have some historical significance, being a now rare survivor of a theatre in the Bourke Street theatre precinct, once the focus of Melbourne's theatre life. 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. The place is of some historical significance for the continuing use of the site as a place of entertainment since the late 1850s, in two buildings – the Excelsior Hotel (incorporating Queen's Hall) occupying the site from 1858-1911 and the present building since 1912. In the absence of further information to demonstrate that there are not other places used for entertainment over a similar period, this place does not meet the threshold for significance at a state level.

Social significance is difficult to demonstrate, but evidence for the social significance of the Palace Theatre at a local level has been demonstrated by the Melbourne community's reaction to its proposed demolition in 2013. A 'Save the Palace' protest rally outside Parliament House on 12 October 2013 was attended by more than a thousand people and an online petition has obtained over 25,000 'signatures'. This interest derives mainly from its use as a live music venue, an important part of the culture of Melbourne, but which has been the focus of activities at the Palace only since 1996. The city and inner suburbs are home to a number of live music venues some of which have hosted live music for longer period of time than the Palace. The Forum (VHR H438), which was also constructed as a cinema, has also been a live music venue since 1996. Festival Hall in Dudley Street, West Melbourne has hosted live music functions since it was built

in 1956. Billboard the Venue (originally the Total Theatre) is located in the basement of Total House (PROV H2329) in Russell Street and has been a live music venue since its completion in 1965. The HiFi Bar and Ballroom, originally a newsreel theatrette, in the basement of the Century Building (1939-40, VHR H2250), has been a live music venue since the 1990s. The Myer Music Bowl (VHR H1772) has hosted concerts since it opened in 1959. Other popular live music venues in the inner suburbs include the Tote Hotel in Johnston Street, Collingwood, the Esplanade Hotel (The Espy) in St Kilda and the Corner Hotel in Swan Street, Richmond. The Palace Hotel is unlikely to have social significance at a higher level than these and other live music venues throughout Victoria, as well as many other entertainment venues in the state.

ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

The Palace Theatre has local significance for the following reasons:

The Palace Theatre is historically significant at a local level as one of the oldest surviving purpose-built cinemas in the City of Melbourne. It was built in 1912 as a cinema and variety theatre, and has been used since then as a cinema, as a live theatre, and more recently as a nightclub and a live music venue. It is the last remaining early cinema in Bourke Street, which was once Melbourne's main theatre district. The site of the Palace Theatre is historically significant for its continuing use as a place of entertainment in Melbourne since the 1850s. The Palace Theatre is historically significant for its association with the prominent artists Arthur Streeton and Max Meldrum, who rented studios on the second floor between 1919 and c1922.

The Palace Cinema is significant at a local level as an early twentieth-century theatre building. It demonstrates a range of features from its various periods of construction, such as its original plan form, its two balconies for seating, remnants of the 1916 plaster decoration in the auditorium, the main stair, the eastern stair with its Art Nouveau tiling and marble treads, the leadlights in the first floor foyer, the dressing room block at the rear and the Moderne style facade.

The Palace Theatre is socially significant at the local level as an important place of popular entertainment in Melbourne since 1912. In the early twenty-first century it has been one of Melbourne's most important small music and theatre venues. A threat of demolition in 2013 provoked much opposition, a demonstration in front of Parliament House was attended by more than a thousand people and generated more than 26,000 signatures on an online petition.

KEY REFERENCES USED TO PREPARE ASSESSMENT

- Daniel Catrice, 'Cinemas in Melbourne 1896-1942', Master of Arts Thesis Monash University 1991
- Lovell Chen, 'Heritage Appraisal, Palace Theatre, 20-30 Bourke Street, Melbourne', June 2013
- Ross Thorne, *Picture Palace Architecture in Australia*, South Melbourne 1976
- Ross Thorne, *Cinemas of Australia via USA*, Sydney University 1981
- 'A short history of the Australian theatre to 1910, at www.hat-archive.com/shorthistory.htm
- Cinema and Theatre Historical Society, Victoria Inc, 'Cinema Index', 1994

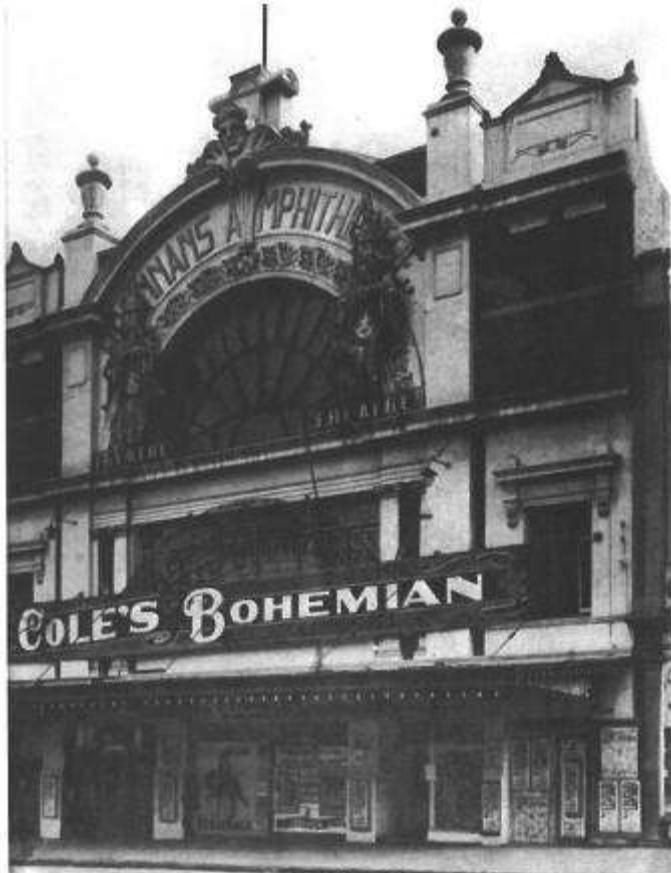
ADDITIONAL IMAGES



The Palace Theatre is located at the east end of Bourke Street, amidst predominantly nineteenth century buildings



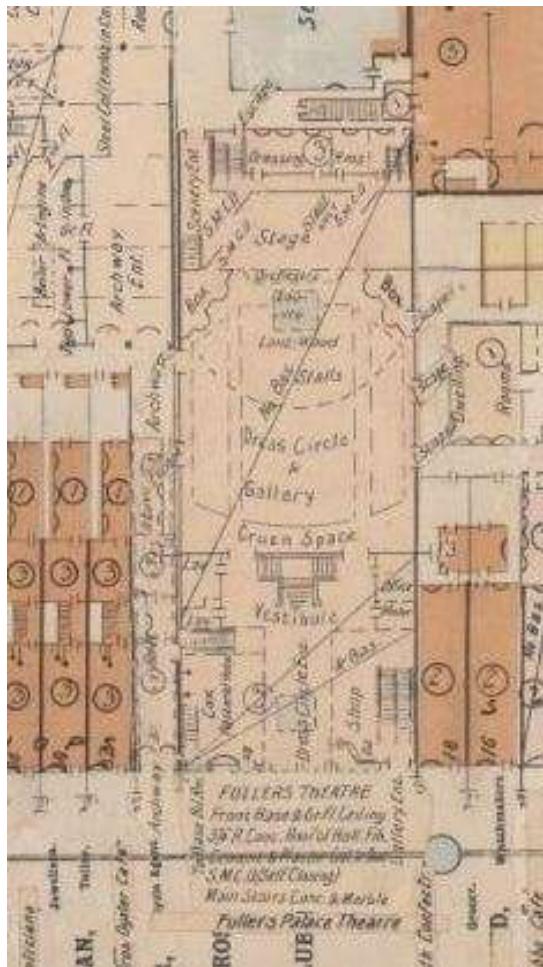
Excelsior Hotel (at right) was on site of Palace Theatre c1858-1911



The original building: Brennan's Theatre 1912



Brennan's Theatre auditorium C1912



Plan of theatre in 1920s



1923 stalls entrance hall



1923 stage and boxes



Dress circle foyer – then and now

OTHER SURVIVING EARLY FEATURES:



Proscenium decoration (re-installed)



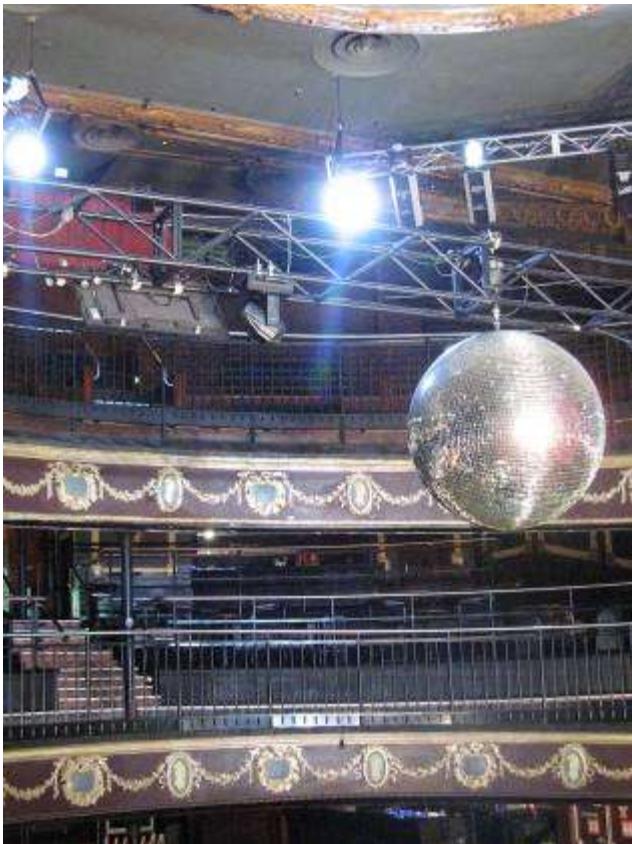
1916 plasterwork in auditorium



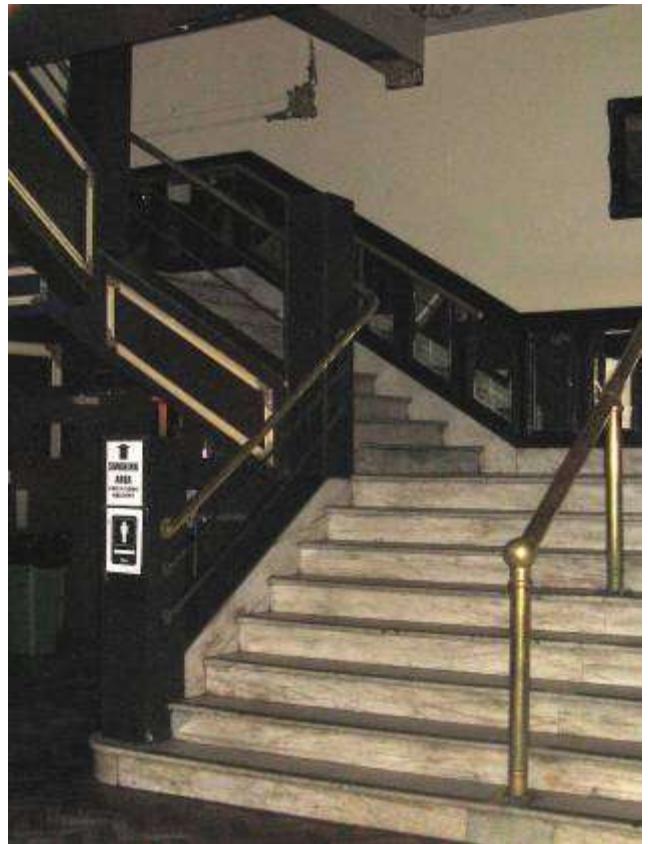
1916 plasterwork in auditorium



Doors and coffered ceiling in dress circle foyer



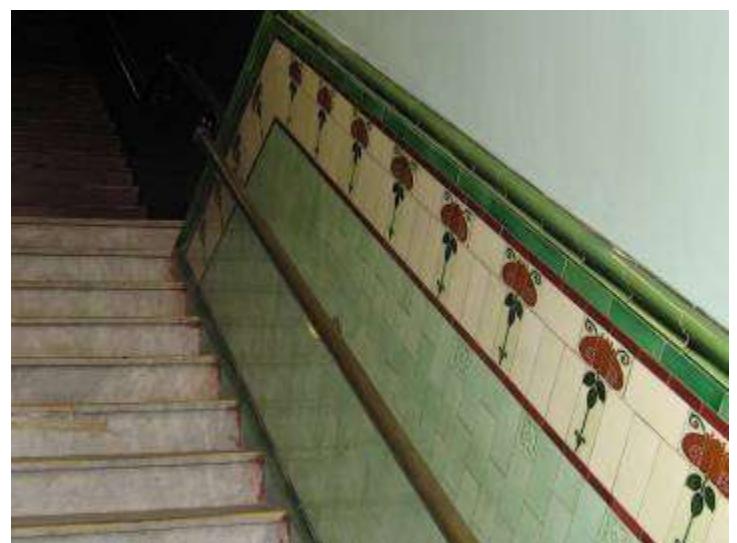
Balcony balustrades with 1916 plaster decoration



The main stairs of marble (1916)



Leadlighting in dress circle foyer



1912 Art Nouveau tiling in eastern staircase