
Westgarth Theatre



City of Darebin Heritage
Review 2000



Map Ref: 30 E11
City of Darebin Heritage
Review 2000 (map)

Location

89 High Street NORTHCOTE, Darebin City

Municipality

DAREBIN CITY

Level of significance

Included in Heritage Overlay

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO101

Heritage Listing

Darebin City

Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

The Westgarth Theatre, erected in 1921 for the Westgarth Theatre Pty Ltd, is of local significance as an early and essentially intact example of a cinema building constructed in a decade of unprecedented growth in the motion picture industry. The oldest operating purpose-built cinema in Melbourne, The Westgarth Theatre is historically significant for its association with a major form of popular entertainment in the twentieth century. As a Greek language cinema (1966-?) and later, as an 'arthouse' cinema (1987-), the theatre has contributed to the major developments in post-war film exhibition practice in Australia. Architecturally, the former Westgarth Theatre is a

significant, but not influential, example of the cinema buildings of the 1920s. The use of classical motifs had been established in the previous decade at the Hoyts De-Luxe, Bourke Street (demolished) and on a smaller scale at the Northcote Theatre and the Barkly and Grand Theatres in Footscray. The Westgarth is notable however for its interior decoration, in particular the geometric details of the entrance vestibule and stairs to the mezzanine section.

[Source: National Trust of Australia (Victoria) 1994]

Heritage Study/Consultant Darebin - Darebin Heritage Review, Andrew Ward, 2000;

Hermes Number 24138

Property Number

Physical Description 1

Constructed of brick, the Westgarth Theatre features a classically inspired exterior, render finished on the principal east facade and the return edge of the side south facade only. The remainder of the side walls are of face brick, articulated by engaged piers and metal framed windows.

The imposing principal facade was designed in the post WWI eclectic Free Classical architectural style, often used for commercial buildings, and based on a Renaissance Palazzo with its division into three distinct horizontal sections: a street level base, the main central section, and a parapet. The principal facade is also formally articulated by engaged piers that divide it into three vertical parts comprising a wide central section flanked by two narrower tower-like sections. The tower-like impression is further emphasised through its repetition on the return edge of the south facade.

At street level, beneath the building's cantilevered awning, is the central entrance to the theatre and two flanking shopfronts - one of which has been unsympathetically altered. The main horizontal section above the verandah extends over two-storey, features smooth banded rustication of the rendered surface, and is punctuated with windows of varying shapes and sizes. The vertical division of the facade is further accentuated by the different design treatment of the central vertical part compared to the flanking, narrower parts.

This central part features a thin, oriel-like advertising sign, stretching almost the full-height of the main horizontal section, with the words 'WESTGARTH PICTURES' constructed of glass lettering within leadlight. The sign is flanked on either side by a set of leadlight windows comprising an arched window placed above a squared window; the area between is decorated with a plain, rectangular panel. Above both sign and flanking windows, a smooth rendered panel exhibits the theatre name in raised lettering. The two narrower side sections each feature a pair of multi-paned windows, placed one above the other with the area between featuring a large decorated panel. A small, rendered balconette with recesses formed to represent balustrades has been placed at the base of each lower window, while each uppermost window is surmounted by an arched hood-mould.

A deep, dentillated cornice separates this main horizontal section from a decorative parapet which is used to complete the facade. The central division of the parapet contains a segmental arched centre which features a recessed panel displaying a large shield-like medallion badge with decorative mouldings. This medallion is now somewhat obscured by a more recent vertical advertising sign. The two side sections of the parapet feature recesses formed to represent balustrades in a similar manner to the balconettes.

The entrance vestibule features a terrazzo floor in red, brown, beige and white and a fibrous plaster ceiling with geometric ornament and recessed leadlight panels. The vestibule comprises a ticket office, sweets counter in wood veneer, and a central staircase with metal balustrade and wooden handrail. The shop in the south-eastern corner of the building has been converted into male and female toilets. The shops in the north-eastern corner currently operates a video cassette library. The mezzanine foyer, with moulded plaster ceiling, extends the entire

frontage of the building and comprises male and female toilets, sweets counter and dress circle staircase in polished wood. The auditorium retains its original vaulted ceiling with an elaborate plaster decoration illuminated by fifteen recessed light panels. The walls of the theatre, at stalls level, are finished in timber panelling. Above this panelling the side walls feature eight large circular light panels with a diamond motif. A similar lighting motif is employed for the ceiling above the stage. The seating capacity of the theatre is currently 712.

[Source: National Trust of Australia (Victoria) 1994]

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

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