

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

Report generated 21/10/17

HERITAGE  
COUNCIL  
VICTORIA  
HERITAGE  
COUNCIL  
VICTORIA

## PELACO SIGN



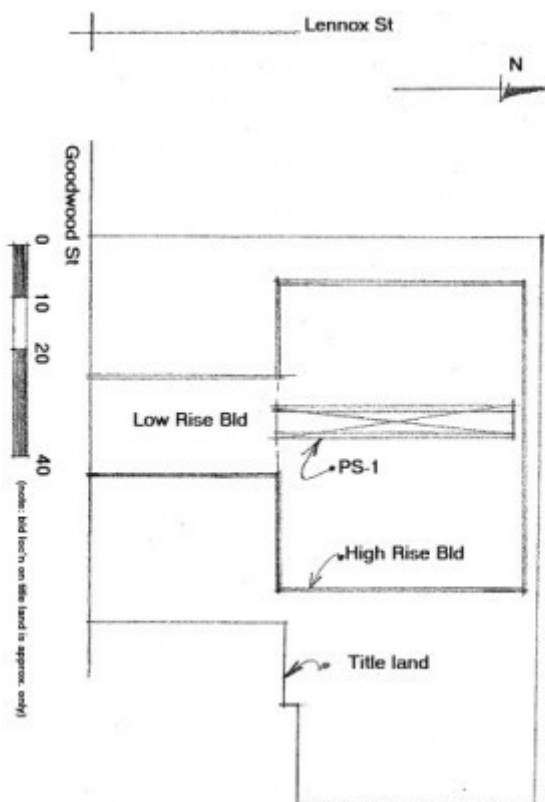
PELACO SIGN SOHE 2008



PELACO SIGN SOHE 2008



1 pelaco sign skyview 1998



pelcao sign registration plan

### Location

21-31 GOODWOOD STREET RICHMOND, Yarra City

## **Municipality**

YARRA CITY

## **Level of significance**

Registered

## **Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number**

H1149

## **Heritage Overlay Numbers**

HO259

## **VHR Registration**

February 5, 1998

## **Heritage Listing**

Victorian Heritage Register

---

## **Statement of Significance**

Last updated on - July 20, 1999

The PELACO Sky Sign was erected in 1939 on top of the PELACO Company's factory in Goodwood St, Richmond. The sign, a large double sided sky sign with individual box letters illuminated in neon, was erected by the Claude Neon Company. The supporting structure extends into the room below roof level.

The sign was partially re-illuminated in 1997 after a long period of dereliction.

The PELACO sign is of historical and social significance to the State of Victoria.

The PELACO sign is historically important as an early example and as a rare survivor of a once popular form of advertising sign employing the large scale use of neon tubes.

The sign is historically significant for its associations with PELACO, the best known shirt manufacturer in Australia. The company was formed by James Kerr Pearson and James Law in 1908 and reached the height of its importance in 1951 when it dominated the Australian market. PELACO was a pioneer in the shirt making industry in Australia and an innovator in the adoption of mass production methods and labour relations in the textiles and clothing industry.

The PELACO sign is socially important with its size and prominence symbolising the dominant role played by the PELACO Company in Australia as a shirt manufacturer. The sign also symbolises the social and economic importance of Richmond as an industrial suburb and its importance in the heartland of Victoria's clothing and textile industry. The landmark status of the sign is enhanced by its prominent position on Richmond Hill and its high degree of visibility from both sides whether illuminated or not.

## **Permit Exemptions**

EXEMPTIONS FROM PERMITS:

(Classes of works or activities which may be undertaken without a permit under Part 4 of the Heritage Act 1995)

Policy

Construction dates 1939,  
Heritage Act Categories Heritage place,  
Hermes Number 4857  
Property Number

---

## History

Contextual History:History of Place:  
WHAT IS NEON LIGHTING?

Neon lighting is the name for the use of a rare gas ie. neon (Greek neos, new), as a conducting medium in a glass vacuum tube where the conducting medium is being electronically excited by high voltage differential between two electrodes. Rare gases used in this patent lighting system also include Argon, Helium, Xenon and Krypton.

Neon gas used this way produces a natural red colour and has its greatest output at 635 millimicrons, the same wavelength at which maximum light transmission occurs in rainy weather.

Neon is therefore ideal for signage because of its intense natural colour which shows up in even the poorest weather and it is especially suited for navigation beacons for boats and aeroplanes.

A neon light has five times the visibility of an incandescent lamp but consumes less wattage - its economy is therefore an added attraction.

“Claude Neon”™ is the trade name for this form of lighting so named after a Frenchman Georges Claude who was the originator of many patents to do with the production of liquid gases.

### BACKGROUND TO NEON AND ITS EARLY USE

The discovery that light could be produced in a sealed glass tube using electrodes to stimulate a contained gas occurred in 1709 by Englishman, J F Hawksbee.

Slow advancement in this field of endeavour occurred due to the evolutionary nature of the production of electricity, rare gases and vacuum tubes.

Another Englishman, D F Moore, had some successes in the use of glass discharge tubes and the 'Moore' tube was produced between 1893 and 1910 although difficulties in large scale production and use prevented larger scale adoption.

A successful although novelty use was made of 'neon' tubing in France in 1910 by Georges Claude who used 'Moore' tubes containing rare gases which were the by products of Claude's pure oxygen distilling process. The use of these rare gases was purely fortuitous but the result was a clear strong light. The real problem was the electrodes which burnt out rather quickly and the glazing around them broke down. Claude was to solve these problems with his patent voltage regulation system and with the problems of electrical supply, an appropriate conducting medium and vacuum tube production (also the subject of a Claude patent) being overcome the commercial 'neon' illumination and advertising tube came into being.

The first 'neon' sign for advertising was on the Boulevard Montmartre in 1912 for a barber shop Le Palace Coiffure. Thereafter followed a number of signs in Paris- the most noticeable being CINZANO. The potential for advertising was immediately realised and seized upon with “Claude Neon”™ operating a plant for making signs from 1914.

In the United States the first neon signs were imported from Paris in 1923 for a Packard Motor vehicle dealership in Los Angeles. These were simple signs spelling Packard in orange letters with a blue border. Each of the two signs cost US \$1200 and were an instant drawcard. Los Angeles police reported traffic and pedestrian

congestion. One of the pair was still in operation in 1974.

In the following year Georges Claude franchised his sign making and more importantly his electrode patent techniques to a number of agencies across the USA, Shanghai and South America.

From then on neon reached its most popular period in the 1940s, by which time it had been used as an architectural feature on Art Deco and Modern Style buildings.

The patent for Georges Claude's neon illumination and advertising tubes came to Australia in 1924 with a patent being granted the following year. However it is unclear when Claude franchised his system here. The Melbourne operation of Claude Neon commenced circa 1932. In 1925 a Melbourne man named Hack of Collins St applied for a patent for improvements to Claudes neon system.

The supply in Victoria of that essential ingredient electricity, starts with its generation for traction and street lighting late in the 19th century. The Melbourne City Councils Lonsdale St power station supplied electricity from 1894 and its production was combined with other small generation establishments such as the North Melbourne Electric Tramways and Lighting Co. Combined, these stations provide power for electric tram services. In 1918 the State Electricity Commission was formed and power from its first large generation plant in Yallourn flowed in 1924. Apart from problems of distribution, this electricity was available to all for industrial, commercial, domestic and civic use. Thus neon lighting was possible in Melbourne from circa 1925.

Photographs of the Melbourne Central Business District show a small number of neon signs in the 1932-34 period. An example is the CAPITOL sign on the Capitol Building in 1932. This is composed of individual 2m high (approx) trough letters with a neon tube inside. This sign became defunct when the Manchester Unity Building overshadowed it. Illustrations of Buckley and Nunn's mens store on Bourke St show that in 1934 (at the completion of construction) neon signage was incorporated as an architectural feature in the buildings design. The words Buckley and Nunn Mens Store were spelled out in neon in the art deco type face sign directly above the entry way.

## DECLINE OF NEON SIGNAGE

What neon signs were erected have vanished through a combination of events starting in the austerity years of the Second World War and then in 1954 when the US Supreme Court decided in favour of municipal controls over the aesthetics of the built environment.

Signage control by-laws then came to be passed in many American communities. By the 1970s campaigns to "clean up Main Street", corporatisation, franchising amalgamations and take overs had led to the loss of many individual, original and unusual neon signs. The introduction of acrylic sheet which when illuminated from behind produced a warm translucent glow sealed the demise of the neon industry. This product allowed signage that was easy to install maintain and readily change.

This same scenario was repeated in Great Britain and Australia where today there are now few historic neon signs with probably less than 50 still in operating conditions in Victoria. During the Second World War all neon signs in Britain were turned off because of air raids and as an energy saving requirement. Occasional daytime relighting of major neon signs such as those in Piccadilly were used as public morale boosters during the war.

The most well known landmark neon signs in Victoria have all been in Melbourne - the Tumbling Dice at St. Kilda junction, the Allen's Sweets sign of South Melbourne and the Skipping Girl in Richmond. Of these only the Skipping Girl remains although this is a 1970s recreation of the 1936 sign.

The Allen's Sweet sign erected in South Melbourne was built onto scaffolding erected after the Second World War. The scaffold was originally intended for an advertisement for a new model of Holden motor car. An Allen's sign was erected in 1955 but this was dismantled to make way for the 30m x 22m 1969 construction that became a landmark until its demise in 1986. This sign displayed six scenes over 35 seconds.

Despite efforts by the Ministry for Planning to save it, the sign was dismantled and all that is thought to remain of it today is the lighting control box.

History of Place:

PELACO was formed in 1908 by James Kerr Pearson and James Law operating as the Derry Shirt factory in

Carlton. Pearson, Law and Co., as it was called from 1911, expanded rapidly and moved to new premises in Gertrude Street Fitzroy in 1912. The re-registered Pelaco Ltd purchased a large site in Goodwood Street Richmond in 1918 and built a modern clothing factory. Despite the difficult times faced by the clothing industry in the inter-war years, the company continued to expand, reaching the height of its importance in 1951 when it employed 1500 people and operated 10 factories, 7 of which were in Victoria.

Pelaco introduced mass production techniques into the textile and clothing industry. Many firms had adopted the principles advocated by Frederick Taylor in 1895 which involved time and motion studies and the introduction of piece rates; however, Pelaco was the first clothing company to introduce the "Industrial Efficiencies".

Pelaco, as part of its overall industrial efficiency programme, introduced many improvements in working conditions in advance of legislation, such as reduction in working hours, the introduction of rest periods and payment for holidays.

Pelaco became part of the multinational company Sara Lee in the late 1980s but was later purchased by a group of Melbourne businessmen.

Of the remaining historic neon signs in Victoria (no comprehensive survey has been undertaken), the largest collection would be in inner Melbourne.

Even here very few remain in operating condition and fewer still are product advertisements. The only known product signs are Sirena Tonno in Lygon Street Carlton on top of King and Godfrey's shop, the Skipping Girl sign and at Elwood the Victoria Bitter sign on the Elsternwick Hotel.

A number of signs indicate businesses no longer operating such as Eliza Tinsley, Bourke Street; Pelaco, Richmond; Ropers, Swanston Street; the Sun, Yarraville. Of the surviving and/or operating signs the largest number are associated with cinemas: the Regent, Collins Street;; the Astor, St Kilda; the Capitol, Swanston Street.

Operating historic signs associated with existing businesses: Don Camillo Cafe, Victoria Street; Borsari, Lygon Street; Bizz Buzz, Keilor Road; Herald Sun, Flinders St; Evans, Elizabeth St.

## Extent of Registration

### NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the **Heritage Act**, I give notice under Section 46 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by including the Heritage Register Number 1149 in the category described as a Heritage Place:

The Pelaco electric sky sign atop the former Pelaco Building, 21-31 Goodwood Street, Richmond, Yarra City Council.

### EXTENT

1. To the extent of all the sign marked PS-1 and including the metal support structure embedded in the building standing on part of the land in Certificate of Title Volume 7152 Folio 252.

Dated 28 January 1998

RAY TONKIN

Executive Director

[Victoria Government Gazette No. G5 5 February 1998 p.300]

*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 1995. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place data owner.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*