

# FESTIVAL HALL



Festival Hall



West Melbourne Stadium  
Later Festival Hall

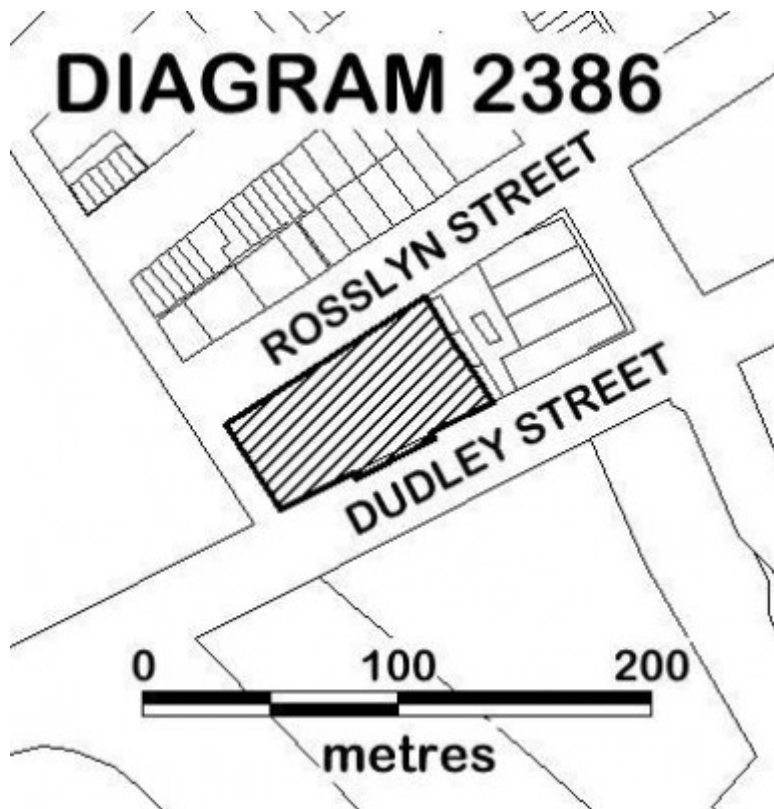
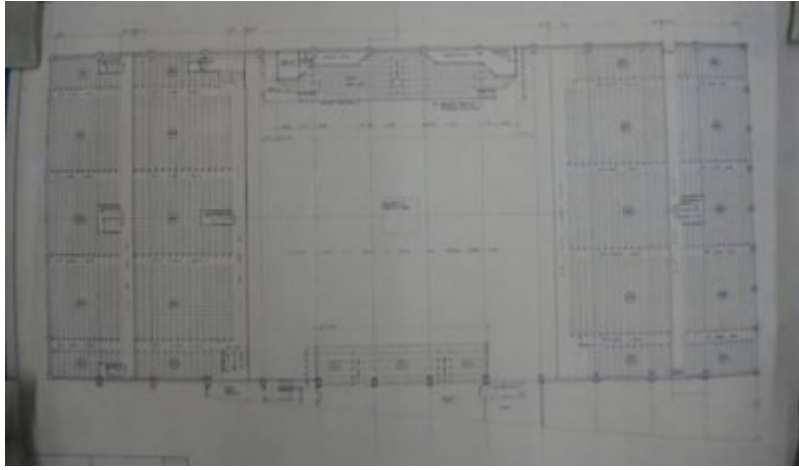
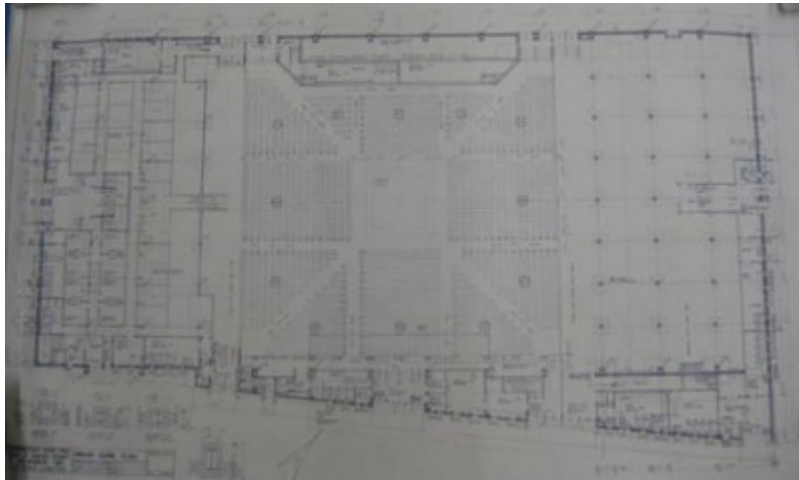


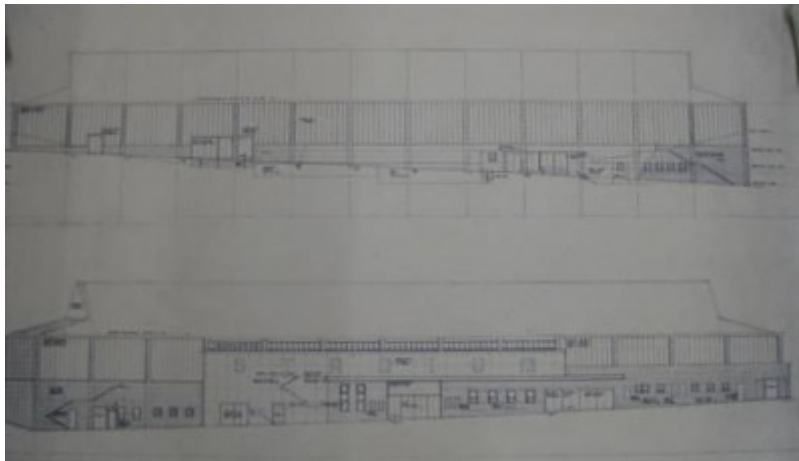
Diagram 2386.JPG



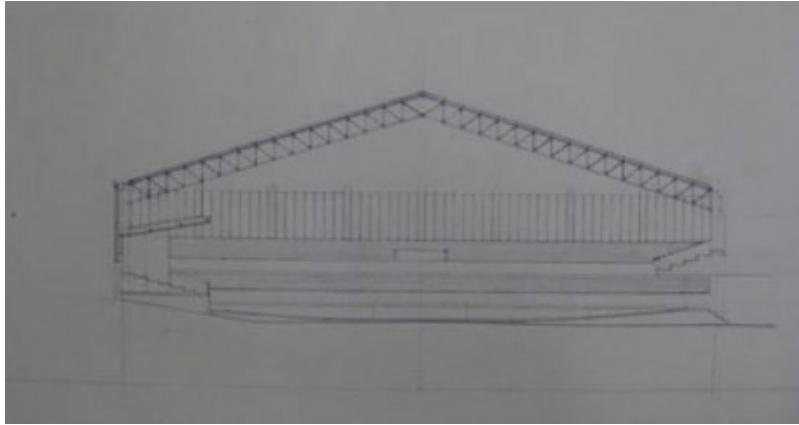
1955, Upper Level Plan.jpg



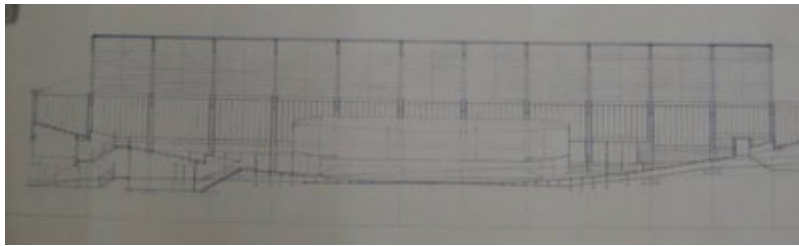
1955, Ground Floor Plan.jpg



1955, Elevations.jpg



1955, Sections.jpg



1955, Section.jpg



c1957.jpg



c1956, showing boxing ring.jpg



Interior.jpg



1982, Dudley Street.jpg



2018, detail of facade.jpg



2018, detail of facade 1.jpg



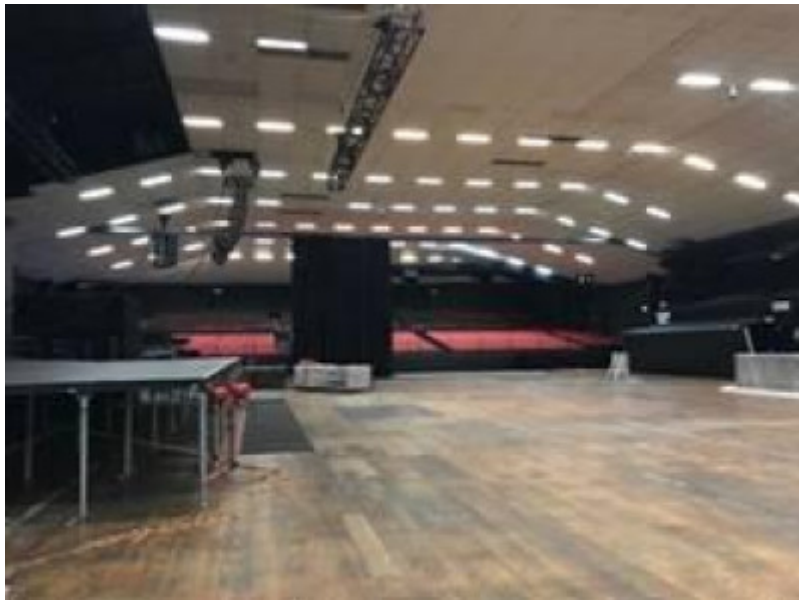
2018, detail of facade 2.jpg



2018, underside of awning.jpg



2018, north west corner.jpg



2018, interior.jpg



2018, rear bleachers.jpg



2018, balcony seating.jpg





2018, Dudley Street from south-east.jpg



2018, Dudley Street from south-east 2.jpg



2018, Rosslyn Street elevation.jpg



2018, east elevation from north east.jpg



2018, details showing concrete panels.jpg



2018, Dudley Street elevation.jpg



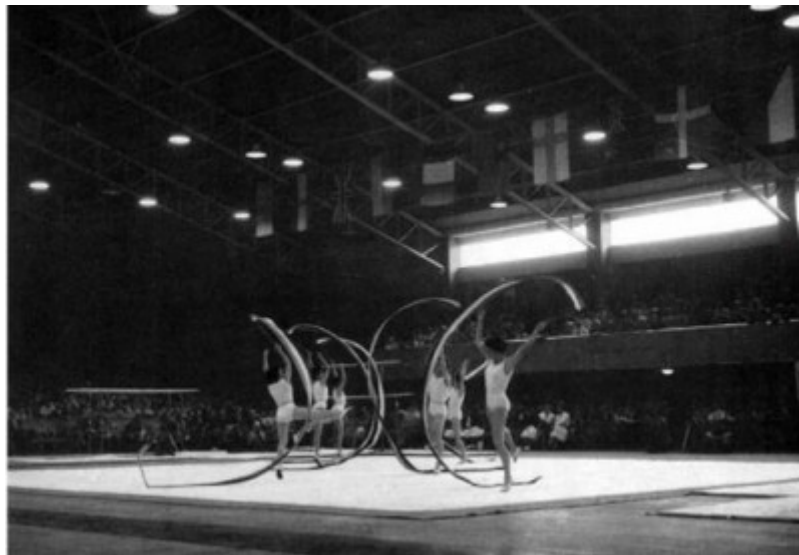
1956, interior nearing completion.jpg



Dudly Street elevation soon after completion.jpg



1956, Gymnastics, Olympic Games.jpg



1956, Gymnastics, Olympic Games 2.jpg



1956, Gymnastics, Olympic Games 3.jpg



1957, ad in Arts and Architecture.jpg



2018, Dudley Street from south-west.jpg

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### **Location**

272-306 DUDLEY STREET WEST MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

### **Municipality**

MELBOURNE CITY

### **Level of significance**

Registered

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

H2386

### **Heritage Overlay Numbers**

HO1183

### **VHR Registration**

November 22, 2018

### **Heritage Listing**

Victorian Heritage Register

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### **Statement of Significance**

Last updated on - January 24, 2022

### **What is significant?**

The cultural heritage significance of Festival Hall at 202-306 Dudley Street, West Melbourne, lies in its historical and social significance as Victoria's principal boxing, wrestling and live music venue in the second half of the twentieth century. The significance of the place is embodied in the external and internal form and fabric of the place. Festival Hall is notably and historically a highly flexible space, allowing it to service a number of dynamic communities and usages.

### **DESCRIPTION SUMMARY**

Festival Hall is a large, unadorned, rectangular indoor sporting and entertainment stadium in West Melbourne. The building is constructed of a steel frame infilled with brick and precast concrete panels. Internally, the stadium comprises a central timber floor with a simple stage to the north, tiers of seating to the west and east, and a balcony to the south. A vast stadium space dominates the interior of the building. This space has historically been reconfigured to accommodate different uses.

### **HISTORY SUMMARY**

Festival Hall, also known as West Melbourne Stadium, was constructed in 1955, replacing the 1913 West Melbourne Stadium. Festival Hall and its predecessor were the principal boxing and wrestling venues in Victoria from 1913 until at least the late 1970s. Festival Hall was a principal live music venue in Victoria from the 1950s until the 1980s and hosted some of the most important national and international musicians of that era.

### **How is it significant?**

Festival Hall is of historical and social significance to the State of Victoria. It satisfies the following criteria for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

#### **Criterion A**

Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history.

#### **Criterion G**

Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.

### **Why is it significant?**

Festival Hall is significant at the State level for the following reasons:

Festival Hall is historically significant as Victoria's principal purpose-built boxing and wrestling venue. Since the late nineteenth century, boxing has been a highly popular spectator sport in Australia attracting crowds in the thousands with many more watching televised matches since the 1960s. Festival Hall - and the 1913 West Melbourne Stadium that it replaced - was the home of Victorian boxing throughout much of the twentieth century, earning it the name "The House of Stoush". Festival Hall hosted the boxing and gymnastics for the 1956 Olympic Games and was the venue for bouts of key national and international athletes including Lionel Rose, Johnny Famechon, Anthony Mundine, Lester Ellis and Barry Michaels. Festival Hall was the venue for the televised 'TV Ringside' (1966-75) and 'World Championship Wrestling' (1964-78) and hosted Lionel Rose's State Funeral in 2011. Festival Hall remains as the only purpose-built boxing and wrestling venue in Victoria. [Criterion A]

Festival Hall is historically significant as one of Victoria's primary live music venues since its opening in 1955 and as the principal venue in Victoria for large-scale live music performances from the late 1950s until the 1980s. Festival Hall played a key role in the social evolution of Victorian society in the post-war period by exposing thousands of patrons to the "new wave" of big production live music. Festival Hall hosted some of the biggest national and international acts of the day including the Beatles, Buddy Holly, Neil Young, The Kinks and Frank Sinatra. [Criterion A]

Festival Hall is socially significant for its association with the live music industry in Victoria. The association between Festival Hall and the Victorian live music community is particularly strong due to the length of the association and the close relationship between the place, the live music community and the establishment and growth of the live music industry in the State. [Criterion G]

Festival Hall is socially significant for its association with the boxing and wrestling community in Victoria. As the site of Victoria's principal boxing and wrestling venue since 1913, the association between Festival Hall and the boxing and wrestling communities in Victoria is particularly strong. While the use of the place for boxing and wrestling has declined since the late 1970s, it remains affectionately known as "The House of Stoush" and continues to be used by the wrestling community for events. The association between the place and the boxing community has more recently been celebrated with Festival Hall being the venue for champion boxer Lionel Rose's State Funeral (in 2011). [Criterion G]

## **Permit Exemptions**



## General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

**Places of worship:** In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

**Subdivision/consolidation:** Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

## Specific Exemptions:

Nil

### Theme

#### 9. Shaping cultural and creative life

Construction dates	1955,
Architect/Designer	Cowper, Christopher,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Other Names	WEST MELBOURNE STADIUM,
Hermes Number	201568
Property Number	

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## History

### *Contextual History*

Boxing and wrestling were popular spectator sports in Victoria from the 1880s and bouts were often held at various theatres and halls in Melbourne and in country towns. At the beginning of the twentieth century professional boxing was gaining popularity in Britain and the United States and in 1904 it was introduced as an Olympic sport in London. As boxing grew in popularity in Melbourne, a number of existing venues were used for competitions from 1900 to 1912, including the Gaiety Theatre, Bourke Street; Lyceum Club, Lonsdale Street; Democratic Club, Swanston Street; the Exhibition Building; Richmond Racecourse; the Melbourne Athletic Club, Exhibition Street; and the Cyclorama building in Fitzroy which was renamed the Melbourne Athletic Pavilion and

used as a boxing venue from 1906 to c1912.

Australian sportsman Reginald L 'Snowy' Baker (1884-1953) began to box in 1902 and competed as an amateur boxer at the London Olympic Games in 1908. On his return to Australia, Baker turned to promoting boxing events and in December 1912 he purchased a large stadium in Sydney which had been constructed for boxing in 1908. Unlike many popular spectator sports, such as football, cricket and horse racing, the sports of boxing and wrestling were best suited to indoor venues and Baker established boxing stadia in both Brisbane and Melbourne in 1910 and 1913 respectively. All three stadia were designed to accommodate large numbers of spectators - approximately 11,000 at Sydney, 5,000 in Brisbane and 12,000 in Melbourne.

These three stadia were the principal boxing and wrestling venues in the respective cities and enabled local and overseas sportsmen to travel and compete in multiple Australian states, particularly during the first half of the twentieth century. Entertainment was provided to thousands of Australians at these stadia and at smaller suburban stadia such as the Fitzroy Stadium (1930-c1944, demolished), Brunswick Stadium (c1914-1916, demolished) and country venues such as the Coliseum, Ballarat; Her Majesty's Theatre, Ballarat, the Old Lyric Theatre, Bendigo and the Paramount Theatre, Shepparton.

The company Stadiums Ltd, established by John Wren and Richard Lean in 1899 and registered in 1914, acquired Baker's interests in the Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne stadia in 1915. As Stadiums Pty Ltd from 1937, this company continued to be run by both the Wren and Lean families until at least the 1960s, despite Wren's death in 1953. John Wren, businessman and sporting promoter, had a particular interest in sport. In addition to his interests in boxing stadia, he owned three Melbourne racecourses, established the Victorian Trotting Association in 1907 and opened the 70,000-seat capacity Motordrome on the north bank of the Yarra River in 1924.

A decline in the popularity of boxing and wrestling in the mid to late twentieth century coincided with the rise of popular music from the 1950s and the associated promotion of major music acts of all genres from Britain and the United States. Stadia which had been built as sporting venues for thousands of spectators were promoted as suitable venues for a myriad of music performers from the mid-1950s.

The boxing stadia in Brisbane and Melbourne were rebuilt in the 1950s and by the 1960s both had been renamed Festival Hall to reflect their increasing use as entertainment venues. The Royal Festival Hall in London, opened as a 2,500-seat entertainment venue in 1951, presumably inspired the renaming of these two Australian stadia.

### *Site History*

Festival Hall, and its predecessor the West Melbourne Stadium, were constructed in Dudley Street, West Melbourne on land that was subdivided between 1855 and 1869 (Figures 6 & 7). As part of this subdivision, existing streets, including Dudley and Rosslyn Streets, were extended westward to the newly formed Railway Place along the existing railway line through West Melbourne. The nearby West Melbourne Swamp was drained and filled from the 1870s to the 1900s and the resumed land to the east was progressively made available for rail yards and other development.

The first boxing stadium in West Melbourne was built at the western end of Dudley Street in 1913. Originally built as Baker's Stadium, the building was located on a large allotment of land, adjacent to the railway line, with frontages to Dudley and Rosslyn Streets and Railway Place. Ground conditions delayed construction of the building, requiring construction of 12-foot-deep (3.7 metres) concrete rafts, however it was reportedly erected in about six weeks at a cost of £10,000. Frank Stapley was the architect and the builder was J D McBride. The first fight was scheduled to take place on

Melbourne Cup Eve and many boxing and wrestling displays were to follow, featuring both local and overseas competitors.

Built as an unroofed brick structure to accommodate 12,000 spectators, the stadium was rectangular in form - 165 feet (50.1 metres) x 300 feet (91.4 metres). It contained a central arena with concrete floor - 100 feet (30.5 metres) x 80 feet (24.4 metres), ring platform - 22 feet (6.7 metres) x 22 feet (6.7 metres) and tiered seating on four sides. It was proposed that a single span louvered roof would cover the stadium. The building was described in *The Herald* as an athletic stadium largely based on the Sydney Stadium (1908), with arena, offices, dressing rooms etc and eleven exits to the three streets and an extra private street. No images of the exterior of the 1913 building have been found, except an oblique view of part of the Dudley Street facade (Figure 8).

In 1915, John Wren and Richard Lean's company Stadiums Ltd acquired the West Melbourne Stadium and it was temporarily closed to enable construction of the proposed roof (Figure 9). The covered stadium was re-opened on Saturday 13 February 1915. Combined vaudeville performances and boxing contests were staged at the newly roofed stadium and a number of fundraising events were held from 1915 to 1917.

World War I impacted on the popularity of boxing and by January 1918 the West Melbourne Stadium was temporarily closed and used by the Australian Mercantile Loan Company as a storeroom for grain and wool. The stadium was reopened in March 1921 after some renovation of the building and a regular weekly pattern was adopted, with boxing on Friday nights, wrestling on Saturdays and a mixture of vaudeville and boxing on Wednesdays. Known as the 'House of Stoush', this stadium continued to draw crowds to boxing and wrestling events.

The West Melbourne Stadium was destroyed by fire on 24 January 1955, with little remaining of the large structure (Figure 11). The General Manager of Stadiums Pty Ltd, Richard Lean, reported that the 42-year-old building would be immediately replaced with a new stadium for boxing, other sports and theatrical productions, to be constructed in time for the Olympic Games in Melbourne in late 1956. Lean stated that the intention was to accommodate 15,000 spectators in air-conditioned, sound-proof comfort in a stadium closer to the city centre however the new stadium was built on the same site in Dudley Street, West Melbourne with a capacity for 8,000 spectators.

Architects Cowper, Murphy & Associates invited tenders for the construction of the new stadium in Dudley Street, West Melbourne in August 1955 and two months later, on 12 October 1955, the completed building, with portable ring and ringside seats, was opened with the 8,000-seat stadium at capacity. A level central floor enabled the venue to be used for boxing (with a 7,000-seat capacity) and for gymnastics at the Olympic Games in November and December 1956 (with a further reduced capacity of 5,000).

The plan of the new stadium generally replicated the layout and form of the original stadium, except the footprint was extended to the east to incorporate a former lane. The estimated cost for the new stadium was £150,000. Steelwork was designed by engineer C S Steele, fabricated by Vickers Ruwolt and constructed in late September 1955. Drawings for the building indicate that pre-stressed, precast concrete panels were used for walling and newspaper reports note that the intention was to retain some surviving brickwork from the earlier stadium. Drawings for the building indicate that some existing footings were reused however, from documentary and visual evidence, it appears unlikely that any existing brickwork was reused. Early images of the completed structure show an unadorned building with brick piers and base, upper parapeted concrete wall panels, a horizontal cantilevered entrance canopy, simple window openings and large signage 'STADIUM' clearly displayed on the upper Dudley Street facade.

As stated by Lean, the rebuilt stadium was constructed as a multi-purpose venue and its use as a music venue was predicted before construction. In April 1955 it was noted that the new Melbourne Stadium was to have 'less accent on boxing and wrestling, more on the music stage for US "gravy train" stars, & provision for tennis, basketball and exhibition dancing'. The new building incorporated a stage with seating along the north side (Figure 20), indicating the anticipated use as a performance venue. Named the 'Stadium' when constructed in 1955 (Figures 21 & 22), the venue had been renamed Festival Hall by 1960, clearly reflecting its primary use in this period. The newly remodelled Brisbane Stadium was named Festival Hall in 1958 and the Melbourne Stadium was renamed soon after.

Richard Lean Junior joined Stadiums Pty Ltd in the 1960s and, under his direction, Festival Hall became a truly multi-purpose venue. Whilst continuing to regularly host boxing and wrestling competitions - including great names such as Lionel Rose, Johnny Famechon, Anthony Mundine, Lester Ellis and Barry Michaels - Festival Hall provided a venue for a diverse range of events including tennis, woodchopping, ballroom dancing championships, religious gatherings, variety acts and television shows. Seating configurations on the main floor were altered to accommodate the variety of events at the stadium. Televising of both boxing and wrestling at Festival Hall in the 1960s and 1970s - TV Ringside (1966-75) and World Championship Wrestling (1964-1978) - ensured regular competition continued at Festival Hall and considerably broadened the sporting audience.

As the only large indoor performance venue in Melbourne at the time, Festival Hall was unrivalled for almost thirty years as the place for popular music performance. Hundreds of music acts performed at this venue, including many of the best-known national and international acts of the time, such as the Beatles, AC/DC, Bob Dylan, Buddy Holly, Elton John, Frank Sinatra, Jackson 5, Jerry Lee Lewis, Metallica, Neil Young, Oasis, Pink Floyd, Queen, Radiohead, Roy Orbison, The Bee Gees, The Kinks, The Police, The Ramones, Tina Turner and Ella

Fitzgerald.

It was not until the Olympic Swimming Stadium was converted into the 'Melbourne Sports and Entertainment Centre' in 1982 (with a capacity to seat 7,200 patrons) and the construction of tennis stadia at the National Tennis Centre (renamed Melbourne Park) in the mid-1980s, that alternative indoor venues were provided for larger-scale live music performance in Melbourne. Centre Court (renamed Rod Laver Arena) was constructed with a retractable roof and, when opened in 1987, provided a very large stadium (c14,000 to 16,000 patrons) for a wide range of sports and entertainment, while Show Court 1 (renamed Margaret Court Arena) provided an unroofed venue, similar in size to Festival Hall (6,000 patrons). The roofing and increase in capacity of the latter (7,500 people) in 2010 increased the popularity of this venue as a mid-sized venue for music performance. When constructed at Melbourne Park in 2000, Hisense Arena provided a multi-purpose venue with retractable roof for 10,500 patrons, and larger venues included Docklands Stadium with retractable roof, constructed principally for AFL football in 2000 (c50,000 patrons) and the Melbourne Rectangular Stadium in 2007 (30,050 patrons).

Often criticised for its acoustic qualities and patron amenity, Festival Hall has decreased in popularity since the provision of alternative mid-sized roofed venues for live music in Melbourne. Festival Hall remains in the ownership of the Wren family and is currently used intermittently for music performance and sporting displays.

## Assessment Against Criteria

### Criterion

Festival Hall is of historical and social significance to the State of Victoria. It satisfies the following criterion for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register:

### Criterion A

Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history.

### 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.

## Extent of Registration

### NOTICE OF REGISTRATION

As Executive Director for the purpose of the **Heritage Act 2017**, I give notice under section 53 that the Victorian Heritage Register is amended by including a place in the Heritage Register:

Number: H2386

Category: Registered Place

Place: Festival Hall

Location: 272-306 Dudley Street, West Melbourne

Municipality: Melbourne City

All of the place shown hatched on Diagram 2386 encompassing all of Lot 1 on Title Plan 743078 and part of the road reserve for Dudley Street.

Dated 22 November 2018

STEVEN AVERY

Executive Director

[Victoria Government Gazette G 47 22 November 2018 2624]

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*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.*

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