
Luna Park - Face & Scenic Railway



B4872 Luna Park face lights

Location

18 Cavell Street,, ST KILDA VIC 3182 - Property No B4872

Municipality

PORT PHILLIP CITY

Level of significance

International

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H0938

Heritage Listing

National Trust

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - February 8, 2008

What is significant? Luna Park in St Kilda was established by the US/Canadian entrepreneur J D Williams, with the three Phillips brothers, Leon, Herman and Harold from Los Angeles. Williams was the main instigator and had established one of the first cinema chains in Australia soon after arriving in 1909. They leased the triangular site of a previous failed amusement park on the St Kilda foreshore in mid 1911 and proceeded to construct an amusement park based on the latest American trends. They imported designers and craftsmen from the world famous Coney Island amusement area outside Manhattan, notably T H Eslick who is credited in the opening brochure with the design of many amusement parks and in particular with the design of the exotic Indian Moghul -

style face and towers. The Scenic Railway itself was designed by the L A Thompson Scenic Railway Company of New York, whose founder LaMarcus Adna Thompson had constructed the world's first purpose built roller coaster at Coney Island in 1884. His 'Scenic Railway' company was so named in 1886 because their designs usually incorporated painted 'scenes' inside tunnels built over sections of the track, and by the 1890s the emphasis was as much on safety as thrills.

Luna Park was a name used around the world for American-style amusement parks, inspired by the first park of that name established in Coney Island in 1903. The Melbourne version opened to throngs of merrymakers on the night of 13 December 1912.

The park at first featured live acts during 'matinee' openings, but it was mainly the purpose-built attractions such as Funnyland (later the Giggle Palace) and the River Caves of the World and the fairy-land effect provided by over 30,000 tiny light globes that drew crowds in summer evenings. Closed during WWI, it reopened in 1923 after a major reconstruction, most notably adding the Big Dipper (demolished 1989) and the beautiful 1913 Carousel (separately classified). Various further attractions were added up to the 1950s, such as the Dodgems in 1926 (separately classified) and the Ghost Train in 1934 (separately classified) and the park remained extremely popular. In the late 1970s, the original purpose-built attractions began to be replaced by mechanical fairground rides. In 1981 the Giggle Palace was destroyed by fire, the River Caves were then declared unsafe and demolished and the park declined in delight and popularity.

Rejuvenation finally started in the late 1990s with the restoration of the Face and Towers in 1998. The remnants of the original face were discovered under later concrete, and retained under a new fibreglass version of the original 1912 face. The Carousel and its canopy were restored by 2001.

The Scenic Railway is constructed entirely of timber, except for the rails, and includes nearly a mile of track in a double circuit around the park, dipping up and down, creating the complex web of timber beams seen today. The cars come in pairs with a 'brakeman' in the centre, who controls the speed of the cars, to ensure that it slows to a near stop at the top of the main dips. The front cars feature ornate carved dragon figures on each side. The ride depends on gravity after being pulled up by a cable run by a 1940s DC generator housed under the main slope. This section also features a side entrance/exit that was enlarged and elaborated in the 1930s with Art Deco style framing.

The most distinctive feature is the face and towers. The face is topped by rays or spikes, connecting it to the arch and towers. The structure is also constructed of timber, with cement render finish to many areas, and feature a pointed horseshoe main arch, flanked by a pair of towers with tall keyhole arched reveal panels infilled with a star and dot pattern, and topped by small open pavilions with horseshoe arched openings supporting large square onion domes. The face is painted in flesh tones, while the arch and towers are painted in a vibrant colour scheme of red, yellow, light and dark blue, with white highlights similar to its scheme since the 1930s.

How is it significant? The Luna Park Face & Towers and Scenic Railway are significant for architectural, technical, historic and social reasons at the International level.

Why is it significant? The Luna Park Face & Towers have historic and social significance as an iconic landmark on the St Kilda foreshore. They are the dominant image of the park, representing the fun and frivolity of the seaside amusement tradition of that suburb, the main playground for Melburnians throughout the 20th century. They are also a recognizable icon of the city and state as a whole. Luna Park has been a beloved and popular amusement park for people of all ages and all walks of life for nearly a century, holding a place of special significance in the hearts and minds of multiple generations of Melburnians. Architecturally the face and towers are a unique design, not only for being a rare example of the Indian Moghul style, but also the major and by far oldest and most extreme example in Victoria of a design that defies conventional architectural norms. The creation of a huge laughing face, often called 'Mr Moon', with entry to the park through the gaping mouth, introduces the bizarre and the fantastical into the urban landscape. The brightly coloured, angular, decorative and exotic style of the arch and towers above enhances this effect. Apart from the Sydney example (built 22 years later and modelled on the Melbourne one), no known face-style entrances, or indeed anything quite so fantastic from the early days of amusement construction, is known to survive worldwide.

The Scenic Railway has International technical and historic significance as the second oldest roller coaster in the world, and the oldest continuously operating one. Only the 1902 "Leap-the-Dips" in Pennsylvania is older, but this is a far gentler experience and did not operate for 14 years in the 1980s- 90s. Built by one of the main inventors of the thrilling amusement, L A Thompson, Luna Park's Scenic Railway is the oldest 'thrill ride' in the world, one of the few remaining by Thompson, and one of the few remaining operated by a brakeman.

Face, Towers, Scenic Railway & Big Dipper Classified: 30/04/1981.

Revised: 29/09/2008

See also B4303, Carousel.

2007 National Trust Victorian Heritage Icon Award (Children's Choice)

Hermes Number 66627

Property Number

Extent of Registration

This classification includes the Luna Park Face (both remnant original and new reproduction, the flanking towers and all lighting and decoration both front and back, the Scenic Railway structure and the platform and maintenance area, the cable machinery, the Art Deco side entrance on Cavell Street, and the three sets of cars.

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/>