AUSTRALIAN CINEMAS

Les Tod

The development of picture theatre buildings in Australia from the turn of the century took place mostly with existing public halls and makeshift open air shows. Gradually some existing legitimate theatres were converted to movie theatres, but it was not until around the 1910-1912 period that substantial purpose-built cinemas began appearing in capital cities and their suburbs.

The first theatre in 'picture palace' style is said to have been Sydney's Crystal Palace, built in 1912 by an American entrepreneur, J D Williams. The theatre was part of an elite four-cinema city circuit set up by Williams, who brought showmanship and a flair for style and publicity to movie-hungry Sydney audiences. The Crystal Palace itself was a remarkable theatre with an auditorium in Oriental style and two massive archways facing George Street. An amusement arcade beneath it was filled with novelty coin-operated machines. Unfortunately the machines would not accept local currency and American nickels had to be specially imported to operate them.

In January, 1913, four companies, one of which was J D Williams, merged to create the giant Union Theatres. This company was the forerunner of the massive Greater Union Organisation which today controls two-thirds of Australian cinemas. With the merger effective, Williams sold his interest and returned to the United States, where he helped found First National, but died in poverty.

From this time, theatre building picked up dramatically, but substantial structures were still confined mostly to the cities. From around 1920 new theatres provided true comforts and luxuries as well as highly elaborate interiors, many of which were either copies of, or derivations from traditionally classically-styled legitimate theatres. With the increasing popularity of the movies, the first 2000 and 3000-seat cinemas began to appear. (In this country a 2000-seat theatre was regarded as extremely large. Some bigger ones were built; one with 3300 seats and another said to have 5000, but 1200 to 1600 was the average. Anything less was regarded as small).

The early 1920s saw the erection of three major theatres that would provide further impetus to develop the theatres further along the lines of the 'picture palace' style. Well, two of them at least. The ornate and luxurious Adam-style Prince Edward in Sydney was built in 1924. It seated only 1500 people, but was renowned for its graciousness, beauty and quiet dignity. The Wintergarden in Brisbane, not as elaborate as the former, was still an important theatre building, in early picture palace style, and with 2100 seats. The third, the incredible Capitol, in Melbourne, deserves a lengthier mention, as it was - and still is - one of the wonders of the cinematic world.

The Capitol opened in November 1924, and seated 2100 people. It was designed by American architect, Walter Burley Griffin, who executed the award-winning conceptual plans for our national capital, Canberra. It is impossible to do this theatre justice in words. Contained within a large office building, it does not have a facade in the conventional sense, but the intricate and awesome auditorium makes up for this. The whole ceiling, extending over the proscenium and down the side walls, is a maze of thousands of plaster prisms, creating an impression that is a cross between catacombs and a computer graphic. Within each prism are lights, thousands overall, which change colours constantly. The effect is inspiring and astonishing. Even today the theatre is years ahead of its time, and has never been copied. In the 1970s it lost its beautiful foyers and back stalls, the dress circle balcony being extended down to meet the stage, which was itself raised slightly. A shopping arcade was then built beneath it. Some conservationists screamed at this outrage, but it was better than losing the entire theatre. Recently the ceiling lamps were renewed and the colour changes are now monitored by a computer console. Today the Capitol is the home of long-run films, equipped with 70mm presentation and Dolby stereo sound.
The construction of these buildings changed the face of theatre architecture in Australia and began the rush to build theatres of opulence and grandeur. The years between 1926 and 1929 saw the erection of mighty picture palaces and atmospheric theatres that took their inspiration from the United States and Britain. As such they were, in many cases, a unique blending of the two - more extravagant than their English counterparts, but not as elaborate, nor as large, as the American palaces.

Union Theatres began building a circuit of 'million dollar theatres,' three of them in 'atmospheric' style, based on sketches by John Eberson. The Sydney Capitol opened in 1928, and was an overnight sensation, with its blue skies, clouds, stars, and Florentine garden setting with 2900 seats. The Perth Ambassadors, virtually a duplicate of the Sydney Capitol but with 2000 seats, opened in 1928, and the massive 3300-seat State in Melbourne opened in 1929. In addition, in 1928 the company built the stunning 2700-seat State Theatre in Sydney. This theatre was a mixture of classical styles - Roman and Empire, baroque and rococo. It was fully restored by the company in 1981 and today is used mostly for films requiring large capacities (Gremlins, ET, Jaws, and so on) for special awards occasions and for the Sydney Film Festival. It is equipped with a wide variety of screen ratios, from 16mm to 70mm, and Dolby stereo sound. Its Wurlitzer organ still rises from the pit, but unfortunately the instrument is in poor condition and badly needs restoring. From early 1987, the State was to concentrate on a new role.

![Figure 1 Melbourne Plaza - now gutted for a shopping arcade (Photo: L R Todd collection @ Hoyts Theatres c1946)]
as a 'live' or concert theatre, with conference facilities.

The Hoyts circuit also went on a theatre-building spree in the late 1920s and became renowned for its chain of fabulous Regent Theatres in capital and some provincial cities. These all featured monumental facades, giant proscenium arches in the classical style, chandeliers, carpets and attendants, etc. The largest was the 3300-seat Regent in Melbourne, with the 1500-seat Plaza Theatre beneath it, this featuring a spectacular Spanish-style decor and a ceiling of murals depicting heraldic crests and zodiac designs (Figure 1).

With the 1930s a last few architecturally-inspired picture palaces appeared, the most notable being the Spanish-style Roxy at Parramatta. Originally seating 2000 and featuring a grand proscenium arch with massed Mesopotamian horses, a Christie organ, huge landscaped forecourt and Spanish decorations, it was one of the best theatres built outside the capital cities. In 1976 its owners, Hoyts, converted it to a triplex, but retained its foyers, facade, forecourt and dress circle, the latter becoming the 580-seat Cinema 3.

The 1930s saw another massive theatre-building spree across the nation. The predominant style at this time was art deco, art moderne, or a combination of both. The Australian version of deco was very restrained and simple, in comparison to American deco, and was used to build or remodel at very low cost. Ornate art deco styling was virtually unknown in this country. The most stylish Australian deco-modernes were the Adelaide West’s (1939), Leichhardt Marlboro (1938 remodeling) and Cremorne Orpheum (1935), the latter in spectacular jazz art deco style. Only the Orpheum still retains part of its original design, but at the time of writing it was not in use. (Proposals to restore it have been announced by Hayden Theatres).

The advent of World War Two put a stop to theatre building and rebuilding. The two major companies at that time were Hoyts, then wholly owned by Twentieth Century Fox, and Greater Union, about to become 50 per cent owned by the J Arthur Rank group of Great Britain. Australia also had two weekly newsreels of its own, Cinesound Review (Union) and Movietone (Fox-Hoyts). In addition to these were the international newsreels.

In the early 1950s, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer began to acquire circuits in Sydney and Melbourne, with additional cinemas in other capital cities. Prior to that they had a small presence in some cities, but in the 50s extended this to neighbourhood houses as well as building their own drive-ins, some of them as twins. One of the better known capital city cinemas was the art deco Metro in Adelaide, built in 1939. The Metro circuit was noted for its luxurious cinemas, few of which survive today.

Cinemascope came to Australia in December 1953, followed a few years later by Todd-AO and Cinerama. Because of the costs involved, only two theatres were equipped for Cinerama, the Plaza Theatres in Sydney and Melbourne. Both were Spanish-style and strikingly similar; both have been gutted for shopping arcades.
Television arrived around Australia between 1955 and 1960, and disaster struck. Theatres closed by the hundreds. Sydney alone, with 250 theatres, dropped to between 50 and 60. Drive-ins fared a little better, due to the teenage trade and the climate, but these were dealt their own death blow by video from 1984.

Today most of our picture palaces are gone. The Sydney State survived, but the Capitol and Regent are both out of use, decaying, and marked for demolition. In Australia campaigns to save theatres are generally unsuccessful because theatres are not recognised as buildings of value. It is difficult, also, to campaign against multi-million dollar projects and unsympathetic Governments. Only the State Theatre in Sydney has statutory protection and even that did not come into effect until early 1986.

Australian cinemas today are mostly multi-plexes built in the 1970s and 1980s, or conversions from older theatres. The main circuits are still Hoyts and Greater Union. The MGM circuit was disbanded in 1971 on orders from the American parent, and most of its theatres acquired by Greater Union. A third circuit, Village, emerged from small beginnings in the 1950s and now operates major circuits in most States. All three companies are now wholly Australian-owned, Fox having sold Hoyts several years ago, and Rank disposing of its 50 per cent holding in Greater Union to the latter in 1985.
Figure 4 Chelsea Theatre Marryatville, Adelaide—formerly the Ozone and before that the Princess—restored 1984 (Photo: L R Todd collection)

Figure 5 Demolition in 1987 of the Rose Bay Wintergarden, NSW (Photo: L R Todd)