

NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA (VICTORIA)

CLASSIFICATION REPORT

NAME: Former Armadale Cinema

OTHER NAMES: Sotheby's

LOCATION: 926 High Street, Armadale
Victoria 3143

FILE NO: F.N. B 7352

CATEGORY: Cinema

STATEMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant?

The Armadale cinema designed by the well known architects Klingender and Alsop and opened in September 1912, is one of the earliest surviving examples of a purpose built theatre for the showing of cinematograph films in Melbourne and Victoria and is relatively intact.

The rectangular, two story building is of red brick with a gabled corrugated iron roof and cement rendered façade, originally white but now pale grey. The roof is supported on steel stanchions set into the ground on concrete blocks so that it is independent of the walls; a feature of the construction seen as unusual at the time. A cantilevered verandah extends across the full length of the façade and shades the central entrance and that of the two adjoining shops. The upper façade is divided into three sections, the central being the widest and tallest with a curved pediment and bordered by two flat vertical pilasters. The facade is not symmetrical, the section on the left being narrower than that on the right. A large central window, curved at the top and with rectangular panes, spans the central section and two smaller similar windows are on either side section. The windows and doorways of the cinema and shops at ground level are surrounded by glazed ceramic tiles of dark green with a linear banding of dark red. Window and door surrounds are copper clad, the doors have panels of beveled glass and there are decorative star shaped marble inlays in all three doorways. Leadlight panels above the doors and windows are pale green textured glass with simplified floral motifs in red and green. The design is restrained and elegant.

Internally the original auditorium walls, barreled ceiling and proscenium arch remain intact together with their original decorative plaster detailing. The balcony and all technical features have been removed due to the change of use.

How is it significant?

The Armadale cinema, completed in 1912, is significant for historical, architectural, and social reasons at a Regional level (Melbourne Suburbs).

Why is it significant?

Historically the building is important as a surviving, relatively intact, example of one of the earliest purpose built cinemas in Melbourne and Victoria. Prominently positioned on a busy thoroughfare with excellent access to public transport, it demonstrates the popularity of the newly emerging entertainment phenomenon, the cinematograph, and the growing importance of the Australian film industry. The Armadale has links with early pioneers of the cinema movement such as Mendel Snider who later opened cinemas in Bourke Street, Melbourne, and New South Wales, and also the Associated Pictures Pty. Ltd., later Hoyt's cinemas. The architects, in particular Rodney Alsop, had considerable reputations for the design of significant buildings in Melbourne. In 1923 Alsop became the first director of the University of Melbourne's Architectural Atelier and in 1932 he was the first Australian recipient of a medal from the RIBA for his design for Winthrop Hall at the University of Western Australia.

Architecturally the building is an excellent example of the work of Klingender and Alsop (1906 -1921) and makes a significant contribution to the streetscape of Armadale High Street. It is unusual in being designed in the Art Nouveau style emanating from Europe, rather than the more customary classical or 'large arch' style employed for other early cinemas such as the Northcote, which also opened in 1912. The façade shows the influence of English architects such as Voysey and Lutyens on Rodney Alsop at the time. This influence was exemplified in his earlier design for the heritage listed house 'Glyn', Toorak, (1908).

Socially the Armadale cinema provided a focus for the community and remained a very successful and popular entertainment venue throughout the early twentieth century until the late 1930s. As well as its role as an early 'picture palace', the Armadale was designed to fulfill other functions within the community and hosted orchestral and theatrical performances and was also equipped with a dance floor for special gala occasions.

EXTENT:

The entire building; in particular all remaining original external and internal features.

HISTORY:

CONTEXTUAL HISTORY:

The cinema:

With the depression of the early 1890's many theatres in Australia were suffering a decline in popularity and needed to offer a new experience to tempt their audiences back. In 1896, barely a year after the invention of the cinema camera and projector by the Lumiere brothers in France, M. Sestier and W. Barnett filmed the Melbourne Cup and screened it at a matinee at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne. During the following decade the screening of films by local entrepreneurs increased, with showings in local halls, theatres or outdoor venues.

Soon a few enterprising persons decided to try taking the pictures away from the vaudeville theatres and screening them on their own (Simon Brand, *Picture Palaces and Flea-Pits*, Sydney 1983).

In 1900 the Salvation Army set up the 'Limelight Unit' and produced the films 'Soldiers of the Cross'. Based on Bible stories these short films were incorporated with live theatre, music and sermons and were used as propaganda to "recruit cadets for Christ" (*War Cry*, 22 Sept 1900).

Growth in the popularity and scale of the Australian film industry occurred during 1905/06 following an increased supply of films from France, the UK and USA, and encouraged the need for more purpose built cinemas. The businessman, George Tallis entered partnership with J C Williamson in 1904 and financed the set up of J C Williamson's Films Ltd. to operate cinemas and produce motion pictures. Other businessmen formed similar companies. The period from 1906 onwards saw a rapid increase in the number of cinemas in Australia. By 1913 there were "57 city and suburban properly organised picture theatres" in Melbourne with 65,000 people regularly attending them on a Saturday night (*Argus*, 25 October 1912). The Armadale Theatre (1912) is one of the earliest surviving examples of one of these very early purpose built cinemas.

The architects: Klingender and Alsop (1906 -1921)

Frederick Louis Klingender (1866 -1932) was educated at Harrow, England, Melbourne Grammar School and Toorak College before being articled to C A D'Ebro of Grainger and D'Ebro, architects. He practiced on his own before forming a short three year partnership, Klingender and Newbigin (1903 -1906). His work was mainly of a domestic character but included, Stalbridge Chambers, Chancery Lane, St. Kilda (1899) and the Adult Deaf and Dumb Church and building in Flinders Street (1904). He was elected Fellow of the RIVA in 1906 and Fellow of the RIBA in 1931.

Rodney Howard Alsop (1881 -1932) was educated at Cumloden, St. Kilda, and following a tour of Europe in 1899/1900, was articled, on his return to Melbourne in 1901, to the architects Hyndman and Bates. Following his admission to the RIVA in 1906 he entered partnership with F L Klingender: "Alsop was reputedly the designer and Klingender the practical partner" (*Australian Dictionary of Biography Online* p.1). Influenced by English architects such as Voysey and Lutyens, he was a founding member of the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria. An example of this influence is his design for the house, 'Glyn', (1908) in Toorak. He had expertise in landscape design and is also reputed to have been a skillful furniture and interior designer. Following his partnership with Klingender in the 1920's, he worked on designs for the Temperance and General Mutual Life Offices in Australia and New Zealand and, together with Conrad Sayce won the worldwide competition for the Hackett Memorial Building (Winthrop Hall), at the University of Western Australia. He was awarded a bronze medal from the RIBA for this building, the "first such award to an Australian architect for an Australian building" (*Heritage Victoria DSE*). He was involved in architectural education and in 1923 he became the first director of the University of Melbourne's Architectural Atelier.

HISTORY OF PLACE:

Armadale Theatre:

Klingender and Alsop were commissioned as architects for the Armadale cinema by the Armadale Picture Theatre Company. The theatre opened on Thursday 19 September, 1912, later than anticipated because of delays caused by "vexatious trade disputes" (*Prahran Telegraph*, 14 Sept., 1912, p.5). The *Telegraph* gives details of the building and cost;

The new theatre has been built by the Armadale Picture Theatre Co. from designs by Messrs. Klingender and Alsop, architects of William Street, Melbourne, who have carried out many similar works, the contractor being Mr. T. Cockram, junior, and the approximate cost 5000 (pounds).

The architects had gained previous experience in the design of cinematograph theatres, notably the Amalgamated Picture Theatre, 178 Flinders Street (probably the

Majestic/Chelsea) in conjunction with Nahum Barnett (opened August 1912, closed 1979 and demolished 1986).

The Armadale Theatre (now Sotheby's) is located on the south side of High Street between Kooyong Road and the railway bridge. It is described in 'Ray Ryan Remembers' a recollection of the early 1930s, (*Cinema Record*, Issue 40, Ed.2-2002 p.11) as being located with excellent access to public transport:

The theatre was perfectly positioned for public transport – the Glen Iris tram past the door, Armadale station immediately behind and the Kooyong Road bus service 150 yards east. For all of its life it never had a rival along the full length of High Street.

The original theatre manager, Mendel Snider, was responsible for supervising the opening of the New Malvern cinema in 1921, also owned by the Associated Theatres Pty. Ltd/ Hoyts Theatres Ltd. chain. Both cinemas benefited from sharing programs. Snider also had a role in the development of the Regent, South Yarra and the Regent Gardiner, and later as a partner in Snider and Dean, acquired theatres in Bourke Street, Melbourne, and New South Wales (*Cinema Record*, 2002).

A full orchestra accompanied the films, and on some occasions special performances were advertised from soloists such as "Mr. John Amadio, flautist... and Mr. William Ryder" who "will play a cornet solo". Contemporary reviews describe the cinema as being very successful and appreciated by the local audiences.

Excellent business has been done at the above (Armadale) pretty and convenient theatre since the opening night, and patrons have gone away delighted with the splendid pictures shown. Saturday afternoon last was a gala day for the children, and long before the doors opened there were hundreds of youthful admirers waiting to gain entrance to the special matinee performance (*Prahran Telegraph*, 5 Oct., 1912).

Costs were relatively expensive; stalls at six pence and one shilling, and dress circle at one shilling and six pence.

The theatre continued to be both popular and successful until 1936 but problems were occurring with new health and safety regulations. In 1935 Hoyts informed the Health Department of plans to remodel the theatre but instead terminated their lease. From 1937 to the end of 1939 when the last picture was shown, it was operated by independent showmen who reputedly had difficulty in paying the rent as a result of poor attendances due to bad pictures. It was then operated as a Vaudeville theatre from 1940 -1942 and renamed the New Armadale Theatre. An extra word was painted to join "the original rendered letters set high on the façade" and two small dressing rooms were added in 1940.

The theatre closed at the end of 1941. The next occupant was a firm called Joy Toys and they were followed by a knitwear and clothing firm. Later a ski school became the tenant and they created an artificial ski slope which finished near the entrance to the stalls. In 1946 new owners of the building wrote to the Health Department to ask about re-registering the building for films, but, as it had not operated as a theatre for four years, they were informed that it would be categorised as a new building and subject to new regulations (*Cinema Record*, 2002).

In 1989 the building was taken over by Sotheby's Art Auctioneers, the current owners, and modifications were made to the interior of the building, notably a mezzanine floor which replaced the old balcony from the back wall to the stage and a central staircase.

DESCRIPTION:

The two story building is of red brick with a cement rendered façade, originally white but now a soft grey. It is rectangular in shape and has a frontage to Armadale High Street of approximately 70 feet, with a "verandah on the cantilever or Continental principle being constructed over the footway". The original gabled roof of corrugated iron was probably renewed when Sotheby's took over. The construction of the roof is described as "out of the common" (*Prahran Telegraph*, Sept 14, 1912):

One feature of construction is quite out of the common, the whole of the roof being supported on steel stanchions set well into the ground on concrete blocks, so that it is really quite independent of the walls, and if these happened to fall down the roof and its supports would still remain in position.

At the back of the building there is an addition which may have been built in 1940 to contain the dressing rooms.

Originally described as a style of architecture "modeled on recent American lines" (*Prahran Telegraph*, Sept., 1912), the façade is simple and elegant with detailing in the Art Nouveau style embraced by Rodney Alsop at the period. It is divided into three sections; the central being the widest and tallest with a curved pediment, and bordered by two vertical flat pilasters. It is not symmetrical, the section on the left being narrower than that on the right. On the upper level central section there is a large multi paned window with a curved top, and on either side are two other similar but smaller windows. The cantilevered canopy lined with ornamental pressed white metal panels projects the full length of the building over the central entrance and what were originally two shops, each with windows and separate entrance.

The theatre had built in shops either side of the entrance. The one on the right side sold sweets and drinks while the other was closed in my time (1930s) (Ray Ryan, 2002)

A photograph of the theatre in 1913 (*Cinema Record*, 2002, p.10) suggests that originally only the door was covered by the cantilevered canopy which had been extended when shown in a photograph taken in the 1930s (*Cinema Record* 2003). The windows and doorways on the ground floor are surrounded by glossy dark green ceramic tiles with a decorative banding of fine dark red tiles. Door surrounds and window frames are copper clad and the doors have panels of beveled glass. The doorways have coloured marble inlays in a star shaped pattern (possibly restored). Above the doors and windows are panels of leadlight glazing, with a simplified floral motif in red and green set in textured glass of paler green. The detail is restrained and well designed in keeping with the reputation of the architects.

Internally many of the original fittings have been removed and a central staircase and mezzanine floor, built across the original cinema hall, has been installed to meet the requirements of the present owners. On the ground floor the shop to the left of the entry has been elongated and is operated by an interior design shop. However, the original walls, proscenium arch, and barreled ceiling remain intact, painted in the original white and with fine decorative plaster detailing. Delicate swags and bows surround the proscenium and a circular medallion above the stage still retains the entwined initials APT picked out in gilt. Original lamps of glass and wrought iron still hang below decorative plaster panels with open grilles set into a circular motif. A large glass skylight now covers an area of the ceiling which incorporated a sliding section in the roof to open for ventilation.

The Armadale was one of a few theatres to have a sliding section of the roof. I remember the roof opening on a very hot evening (1930s). Only in recent years was the sliding section replaced by corrugated iron, the mechanism that operated it left hanging from the rear wall (Ray Ryan, 2002).

The theatre was described as having a capacity for 1200, with 800 in the main hall and 400 in the balcony, and has having a wider scope within the community (Prahlan Telegraph, 1912).

The floor has been laid for dancing, and indeed is a ball-room floor, for while cinematograph pictures will form the principal attraction at the theatre, it is designed also for social gatherings and functions, for which there is a great need at Armadale.

An original plan (*Cinema Record*, 2002, p.13) shows the layout of the ground floor with steps at the left and exit to the right to give access to the upstairs lounge and 'dress circle'. An unusual feature was the location of the bio box. *Cinema Record* states that the Armadale was possibly the "only purpose built, balcony cinema to retain the bio box at the back of the stalls". This may have contributed to its early demise due to safety concerns over the dangerous nature of some of its contents.

CONTEXT:

The building (former cinema) is set on a busy thoroughfare in the inner city suburbs close to the intersection of High Street Armadale and Kooyong Road. It is close to Armadale station and the tram routes. The building blends harmoniously with the design of the station and also with other buildings of a similar era adjacent and opposite to it. It makes an important contribution to the urban landscape.

INTACTNESS:

Apart from minor changes, the exterior of the building remains as originally designed in 1912. Sotheby's name has replaced the original theatre title high on the central section of the facade. Internally many of the original decorative features still remain on the walls and ceiling and are in excellent condition, but major modifications have been made to suit its present function. The original balcony has been replaced by a mezzanine floor which obscures the lower part of the proscenium arch, and a central staircase has been constructed to access the (now) showroom area. None of the technical features remain.

COMPARISON:

There are very few remaining purpose built cinemas from this very early period of cinema history in Victoria. Most of those that do remain have all been substantially altered either externally or internally or both, and now, like the Armadale Theatre, are used for different purposes.

The most comparable of the remaining early suburban cinemas is the Northcote Theatre, High Street, Northcote, (classified as of state level). Although currently operated as a reception centre it retains most of the original façade and the internal features of the auditorium, including the ornate curved ceiling and the balcony, now walled off. Like the Armadale, it was purpose designed by a notable architect, F G Richardson, and completed in the very early phase of the cinema industry in Victoria and Australia. It opened on the 27 June 1912, three months before the opening of the Armadale Theatre which had been delayed due to "industrial dispute" (*Prahlan Telegraph*, Sept 7, 1912). Both cinemas used the device of the sliding roof to assist ventilation, and both had their bio box at the rear of the stalls, although the Northcote Theatre appears to have been upgraded more substantially from a health and safety perspective allowing it to function as a cinema for a longer period. Another early cinematograph theatre, the Elster in Elsternwick (now the Classic), opened a year earlier in 1911 and was adapted by Richardson from an existing public hall. Although the façade of this building remains substantially intact and the cinemas within still operate, the interior has been completely remodeled and the entrance removed to a new extension on the left of the original façade.

Architecturally the style of the Armadale cinema differs from its early competitors. Most of the early cinema buildings including the Northcote were designed in an imposing classical or neo baroque inspired style and used devices such as heavy pediments, deep central archways and other ornate features. In contrast the Armadale is more modest in style and has a façade which exploits the simple, elegant use of decorative elements and colour. It was more in keeping with the architectural Art Nouveau style emanating from Europe and America, lighter and less pompous. An earlier theatre by Klingender and Alsop, the Majestic, Flinders Street (1912), showed the emergence of this trend but retained a more formal feel than the later Armadale. The Armadale has some architectural similarities with the Canterbury Theatre (cinema from 1924), also completed in 1912 and designed by A E Carleton. Elements of the lower façade, in particular the use of copper clad surrounds for windows and doors and colored leadlight glazing over them, show an Art Nouveau influence but the upper façade is more in keeping with the neo baroque style. Another theatre façade which had some similarities to that of the Armadale but was also much heavier in detail was that of the St. James Theatre in Bourke Street, now unrecognisable and remodeled as the Metro Nightclub (Brand 1983).

Other cinemas still in existence from this early period of cinematography still functioning in some way are the Lyric, Brunswick, (1911), (Casino Dance Hall & Brunswick Club), where the upper classical design of the façade remains in original and good condition and the Grand, Footscray, (1911), (now a Bingo Hall) also with original façade and ceiling. A former cinema in Bay Street, Port Melbourne, has been refitted as a public house, the 'Local' but only elements of the upper façade and the external shell of the building remain.

References:

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