The notion of retaining (and restoring) or demolishing the Capitol Theatre, Sydney, came and went, largely depending upon who was in power at the Sydney City Council that was the owner and lessor to various occupants. In the bureaucracy of the Council their was a "lobby" to demolish and redevelop the site for more money than the theatre would bring in to its coffers.

At the time the theatre was simply accepted as a late 1920s example, and one of only four in Australia, of the “atmospheric” style of theatre/cinema design. Therefore it possessed rarity value in the state as a heritage item. However, for some years I had known from US exhibitors’ journals that the American architect, John Eberson had had a role in its design. Historian colleague, Les Tod, had also told me that there seemed to be parts of the building that not only dated from its former manifestation as a Hippodrome, but also the earlier market building on the site.

Whatever was this earlier history, it had been lost from collective memory although, as I would discover in February and March, 1985, the (quite remarkable) documentation existed at the Sydney City Council Archive. It was remarkable for it told a story of quite a unique re-use of first, the market building, followed a little over a decade later by second, the Hippodrome building.

It was this publication that prompted an “Ideas Competition” by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects later in the year. And when an open day at the theatre was held in 1987, the detractors of retention were surprised at the thousands who turned up, most wanting the theatre to remain.

Key words: Theatre architecture; Hippodrome; Heritage buildings.

Illustrations: New Belmore Market; Hippodrome; Capitol Theatre.

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SUMMARY

THE CAPITOL THEATRE

A CASE FOR RETENTION

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USA are listed as historic monuments by State or Federal governments and are restored for live theatre.

1. What are the options for retention and re-use of the Capitol as a live theatre?

According to American urban economists restoration of a
The New Belmore Markets soon after building, circa 1893, possibly from the corner of Pitt (left) and Campbell Streets.

New Belmore Markets, possibly Pitt Street facade, some years after the top photo. Note the same gas light, but also the addition of the pole with the new telephone lines.
SUMMARY

1. The Capitol is the oldest theatre building in New South Wales with significant elements of the design and decoration dating from 1892/3, rebuilt and reused from the "New" Belmore Market Building of that date.

2. As a theatre it was reconstructed from the Belmore Market Building from 1914 to 1916 by the Sydney City Council for Wirth Bros. (circus owners) as the Hippodrome. As such it contained a deep fly-tower stage and a 40 feet (12 metre) diameter circus ring, the floor of which could sink to produce a pool for aquatic staging. This ring still exists under the stalls floor.

3. Internal alterations and remodelling of 1928 converted it to the first of four American style "atmospheric" picture palaces in Australia. It is the last remaining intact example in this country, and one of three, as far as is known, still existing outside of North America (the other two being in New Zealand and South Africa). A number of those in the USA are listed as historic monuments by State or Federal governments and are restored for live theatre.

4. What are the options for retention and re-use of the Capitol as a live theatre?

According to American urban economists restoration of a
theatre in a rundown area of a city promotes redevelopment and rejuvenation of such an area increases values and therefore the income to the City Council (as has occurred in Aurora Ill.).

Accommodation for audience and performers can be improved by additional foyer space either in a basement level and/or in adjoining sites, with the stage being extended into a closed Hay Street. Closure of Hay and the adjacent Parker Streets is possible as the property owner on each side of Parker Street is the City Council, and for Hay Street, the City Council with the Commonwealth Government owning the south side from Parker to Pitt Street. The rear wall of the Capitol is already the product of brick walls being pulled down and rebuilt from the Belmore Markets in 1914-1916 and can be similarly rebuilt at the rear of an extended stage house. With the precedent of building the pedestrian tunnels across George and Druitt Streets and the car park in York Street for the redeveloped Queen Victoria Building, re-siting of services in Hay Street to accommodate an extended Capitol stage would be feasible.

5. The cost of restoring and adding to an existing theatre is significantly less than demolishing and rebuilding a new theatre. The precedent for this understanding is not only from USA but from Perth, W.A. with the restoration, incorporating considerable rebuilding of and additions to (foyers, dressing rooms, rehearsal rooms and toilets of) the Her Majestys Theatre in that city.
SECTION 1 “New” Belmore Market Building

Prior to 1892 the site bounded by George, Campbell, Pitt and Hay Streets, containing a small “Haymarket Building”, was known as Haymarket Reserve\(^1\). The site was used for “Paddy's Market” on Saturday nights. Together with the stalls displaying all manner of wares were to be found “circuses, sideshows of all descriptions, itinerant musicians, street corner missionaries, pie and green-pea vendors (and) merry-go-rounds”\(^2\).

A Committee of the then Sydney Municipal Council was appointed on 24 March 1891 to find and recommend a site for wholesale fruit and vegetables. It recommended part of the Haymarket Reserve site at Belmore Square\(^3\). Plans and specifications for the erection of the Market Building were prepared by the office of the City Architect and Building Surveyor, Mr. George McRae. Some 31 drawings and 24 tracings were executed by the office, perhaps largely by R.H. Brodick who was singled out for praise by Mr. McRae as being “a valuable assistant and draughtsman”\(^4\). The Plans were approved by Council on 28 July 1891\(^5\) and the tender for 24,902 pounds prepared by Mr. A.M. Allen of Summer Hill, was accepted on 24 November 1891\(^6\). This price included a specified sum of 1370 pounds (5.5% of the contract) for the supply only of special decorative terra cotta “all executed to details which will be provided”\(^7\). This excluded other decorative work such as the stone cornices and facing to lower parts of the walls. It also excluded the four decorative half circle windows in the central pediments surmounting each facade. A sum of 200 pounds was allowed for the glass alone\(^8\), a sum which when converted into today’s building costs would be around $15,000.

Accordingly, after the Queen Victoria Market Building (George/York Streets) and the Town Hall, the New Belmore or Sir William Manning Market was possibly the next most highly decorated and important municipal building in Sydney. The later market buildings (at the end of Darling Harbour), parts of which have been retained in their recent redevelopment were more economical and austere in design. The Town Clerk reported the building, after its opening as:

"The edifice is a fine stately and ornate structure, being a distinct departure from the ordinary character of such
The half of the New Belmore Markets that was leased by Wirths' Circus became the Hippodrome, after rebuilding above the remaining 2.6 metres high side walls of the Market building and with the use of the original bricks and terra cotta ornamentation. The interior and roof structure was entirely new, becoming an auditorium with a stage plus a circle for circus events; the latter being able to be lowered to be filled with water to become a pool for aquatic events particularly with animals.
SECTION 2 Reconstruction: Market Building to a Municipal Hippodrome Theatre

The fruit and vegetable wholesale market trade outgrew the New Belmore Market Building within fifteen years and a new series of buildings for fruit, vegetables and produce were constructed west of George Street and opened in 1909. There was no indication that the Sir William Manning Market Building was outmoded or had outlived its usefulness as a building. There was no indication that the building was old fashioned or should be pulled down. In fact both the Mayor and the Council thought the building should simply be remodelled for new uses:

"to suit prospective tenants subject to satisfactory arrangements being made as to rentals .... As an alternative, however, it was recommended that the existing building should be remodelled and that the City Building Surveyor should be instructed to prepare plans accordingly showing how the buildings could best be adapted and utilised".

No such sympathetic treatment was shown to the Old Belmore Markets on the adjacent site between Pitt and Castlereagh Streets. These were demolished and the site subdivided into two lots and leased in 1910. (The individual lessees then proceeded to construct the Adelphi Theatre, later Tivoli, facing Castlereagh Street and the Hotel Sydney, facing Pitt Street.)

The New Belmore Market site was also subdivided into two almost equal lots. The half facing Pitt Street was redesigned and a tender was accepted by Council on 14 May 1913 for the "Sir W.P. Manning Market Alterations" for 30,368 pounds from J.M. and A. Pringele. Authority was to be sought from the Governor-in-Council "to borrow thirty two thousand pounds for purpose of alterations ... excluding the portion to be occupied by Messrs. Wirth Bros., and for which authority to borrow will be required later". A photo album at the City Council Archives shows the progress of the "Alterations and Additions to Sir W.P. Manning Market ....". This building work must be one of the rare occasions when a building was carefully pulled down and re-erected to the same design on the same site but extended three to four metres above the ground. Basically the additional height incorporated the shops at ground level while the arcades of the old market, rebuilt above, were infilled with windows to provide light to the two levels of new office floors behind. One triangular pediment was rebuilt to face Pitt Street (since removed when further floors
were added), two others would be rebuilt on the Hippodrome/Capitol. It is also clear from the Specification attached to the Contract between the Builder and the Council that this reconstruction was intended.

"The greatest care must be exercised in removing the terra cotta and moulded bricks in arches .... Any bricks taken down from existing positions may be cleaned and re-used if approved by the Architect (Stacks of such cleaned bricks can be seen in the photo album referred to above.)

"The Contractor is to take down and carefully re-erected the whole of the existing freestone cornices, frieze, pediments, parapets, tablets, corbels, etc. as and where shewn and as hereafter specified ....

"The Contractor is to take down and re-erect the whole of the existing terra-cotta capitals, keystones and friezes, below springing of semi-circular arches and elsewhere, circular tablets to other spandrels, diaper tiles in pediments, key-stone and other terra-cotta work and re-erect same as shewn and in an approved manner".

These identical clauses are also in the Contract Specification for the Hippodrome between the Municipal Council of Sydney and William Maston and Thomas Yates. The only exception in this later document is a handwritten paragraph pencilled in to inform the builder where was stored the stonework and terra-cotta for the pediments, cornices and tympanum which would be required on the Cambell and Hay Street elevations of the Hippodrome.

However, prior to the contract being signed Council at its meeting of 4 June 1912 discussed the possibility of converting the market to a Municipal Theatre "to be conducted on similar lines to such theatres in other parts of the world". A motion that this not be approved was withdrawn. Then, in September of the same year a "tender of Wirth Bros. for the lease of portion of the Sir William Manning Markets Buildings for a term of twenty one years at a rental of two thousand two hundred and fifty pounds (£2250) and 6% on an expenditure of approximately nine thousand pounds be accepted".

The notion of providing a theatre may have come from the temporary use of the Markets Building by Wirth Bros. for "the purpose of a circus and hippodrome" earlier in the year when the Council granted the firm the use of the markets for a period of 10 weeks at 400 pounds per week. Certainly the Council had every intention of supplying the new theatre building to Wirth Bros. It had its City Architect and Building Surveyor, now R.H. Brodrick, prepare the plans which were approved by the Finance Committee on 3 September 1913. The tender from Maston and Yates for the sum of £32,500 was accepted by Council at its meeting on 16 December 1913. The contract between the Council and the Builders was signed on 23 December 1913 but the attached specification
Comparison of Pediment and arches of New Belmore Market and of the design for the Hippodrome, Hay Street elevation.
ABOVE: The central feature on the four sides of the New Belmore Markets building - a pediment with arches beneath having spandril panels of "fruit laden" twigs. Diaper tiles are on the tympanum of the pediment encompassing the single arch. BELOW: The same pediment with a single arch and "fruit" spandril as rebuilt into the Hippodrome and retained when rebuilt as the Capitol Theatre.
Original wall of the Market remaining up to 2.5 metres above the pavement, and on which the Hippodrome is built.

Exterior of the Hippodrome/Capitol Theatre, generally dating from 1915/16, but showing elements of design as re-used from the former New Belmore Markets building constructed in 1892/3.
TOP: Long section of the Hippodrome with Campbell Street at left and Hay Street at right, showing the tree level auditorium, circus and water tank at centre and deep stage at right with fly-tower at right.
LOWER: Plan with the same disposition as the section above, but more clearly showing the vestibule (left) and animal entry-ways at the stage.
has an important handwritten clause inserted on page 2. It notes that portions uncoloured on plans and elevations indicate existing work. The original linen working drawings in possession of the Council show that, with the exception of the stage, the exterior walls were built off the foundations of the Market Building and along Parker Street the existing wall of the market was retained for a height of about two and one half metres from the pavement level.

This all indicated that, like the offices/shops half of the site fronting Pitt, Campbell and Hay Streets the Hippodrome Theatre was to re-use existing parts of the New Belmore Markets Building in situ, and many other parts re-installed in their new positions according to the old design. Most of these elements remained when the Hippodrome was converted to the Capitol Theatre in 1927/8. Thus much of the exterior can be dated to 1892/3. The original Hippodrome Theatre possessed a fly-tower stage which was 72 feet wide and 54 feet deep and, immediately in front, a circus 40 feet in diameter, the floor of which could be dropped 12 feet to become a "tank" for aquatic events. It was opened to traditional circus programme on 3 April 1916.

In May 1927 Wirth Bros. made an application for conversion from a traditional amphitheatre (circus) type of theatre, seating 1846 persons, to a conventional theatre seating 2999 with the stage reduced in depth by half. The plans were submitted on behalf of the circus entrepreneurs by Henry E. White. The circus/tank was to be covered over but able to be reinstated if desired by Council at the end of the lease.
SECTION 3 Internal Conversion to Capitol Theatre

After obtaining permission to convert the Hippodrome Wirth Bros. sought and obtained a transfer of the lease to Capitol Theatre (Sydney) Ltd., on 20 July 1927\(^{26}\), a company formed by Union Theatres then under the managing directorship of Stuart Doyle. Even while Wirth Bros. were seeking the permission to alter the theatre Stuart Doyle and Architect Henry White had been travelling USA inspecting the latest in theatre/cinema design and were on their way home. They both had inspected, and were impressed by the Riviera Theatre, Omaha, designed by John Eberson\(^{27}\) in his newly developed "atmospheric" style which comprised an imitation, exotic walled garden environment for the auditorium. More than ever before this style of interior decoration placed the audiences for moving pictures in a world of make-believe approaching that of the subject matter of the films themselves.

White's first drawings for the "Remodelling of the Hippodrome" were approved by Council on September 13, 1927\(^{28}\). These only showed structural changes such as lifting the existing Hippodrome roof trusses to a new higher position and cutting the stage back to half its depth, the substitution of two upper tiers with one deep dress circle, and a new re-raked stalls floor. Later blueprints of drawings showing the decorative details of the "atmospheric" plasterwork, ironwork, doorways and furnishings, etc. are also deposited with the City Council. It was reported that the Capitol "was designed from sketches by Eberson whose associate architect in Sydney was Henry E. White"\(^{29}\). This was contained in one of the very few articles about Australian theatres in American motion picture exhibitor journals. The inclusion of the Capitol indicated that this design was equal to examples of this style in USA. Union Theatres Ltd. claimed the remodelling had cost 180,000 pounds\(^{30}\). In today's currency value that would be around $6 million.

The Architectural and Historical Heritage of the Capitol

Entertainment in the form of circuses and other theatricals such as melodrama (in the Hippodrome), like variety revues (within the movie programmes of the Capitol in its early years) and, in recent years, musical theatre, has taken place on the site for over one hundred years with the exception of the fifteen year interval when it existed solely as a fruit and vegetable market. At the same time the site has a continuous link with its longer history.
(of about 140 years) as a market through the reuse of the design of the New Belmore Markets and actual use of building materials and parts of the existing fabric of that building dating from 1892/3. This link is symbolised in the re-used terra cotta ornament, particularly the decorative spandrels beneath the pediments which depict branches of trees complete with a variety of fruit thereon.

Architecturally the design of the New Belmore Markets incorporated one of the earliest uses of terra cotta ornament on a large scale in a building in Sydney (manufacture of this building material only developing in the 1880s). The original proportions of the market building appeared ponderously Victorian but once raised considerably higher, and with a reveal of less depth in the infilled arches, the design for the Manning Building and Hippodrome took on an almost Edwardian lightness.

Some of the exterior, mainly cosmetic changes, made during and after the conversion to the Capitol, have not been sympathetic to the design of the building as reconstructed as the Hippodrome. Stripping off paint on bricks and terra cotta and unsympathetic "Spanish" style rough plaster, and improving the design of later infill of windows in order to return the appearance to the spirit of the Hippodrome design, if not quite entirely to the external design, would not be an onerous task.

As a result of the intentions of the City Council in 1912 the City Architect produced a building which has an unusual uniqueness, historically and architecturally, and which can be said is 70 to 92 years old. The building is on the Register of the National Estate.

The remodelled interior was opened on 7 April 1928, and for that first and many subsequent audiences:

"One seemed to have stepped from under the dull skies of everyday life and passed into an enchanted region where the depth of the blue heavens had something magical about it and something heavily exotic. Clouds passed lightly over then stars began to twinkle. Then all was blue and clear"31.

Thousands of miles away in USA the creator of this "magical" environment, John Eberson, would have been pleased that one of his atmospheric theatre designs had succeeded in imparting to the Sydney Morning Herald reviewer and
the audience on that first night exactly the feelings he intended. He and other theatre architects of the 1920s believed that they were effecting a psychological impact on the audiences which would experience their interiors. They produced very successful buildings and this is now being recognised in their country of origin. An example in Atlanta, Georgia, the Fox Theatre, has been declared a national landmark monument by the U.S. Federal Government. Others, even of more modest visual quality than that of the Capitol are being retained, restored and re-used as performing arts facilities in cities in other states of USA.

The basic style was to use a mock garden wall around the perimeter of the auditorium with a simple arched ceiling, springing from "behind" the "garden" wall, to simulate a sky. The theme for the surrounding wall and decorative elements usually was derived from a mediterranean or equatorial Asian architecture (Persian, Spanish Gothic, Indian, Moorish, etc.). The theme for the interior of the Capitol was interpreted as Italian in general while the City Council's publication *Vade Mecum* for 1941 describes:

"All doorways and windows are designed along the lines of the palaces which were constructed in Florence during the period of the Guelphs and Ghibellines - rival families which adopted different types of architecture to distinguish their buildings" (p.140).

John Eberson was responsible for the design of over one hundred theatres, not all of them atmospheric in style. He is now considered to have been one of the best theatre architects of that grand spending era from the end of World War I to the Great Depression. He ranks amongst the top half a dozen architectural firms which produced the highly decorated idiosyncratic architecture desired by the larger-than-life movie moguls, such as William Fox and Henry B. Mayer, during the "golden era" of Hollywood silent films.

The great movement to save picture palace type theatres began in the USA in the early 1970s as a concern for that country's social and architectural history. It has achieved an impetus which, for intensity, has not yet arrived in Australia. The League of Historic American theatres, an organisation founded in 1977, has prepared the *National List of Historic Theatre Buildings* a reference work which lists the particulars of over 900 historic American Theatres. There are three picture theatres which have qualified for "landmark" national monument status, and a further 130 have been placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Buildings. Apart from the Landmark examples in Atlanta, Georgia;
Capitol Theatre auditorium as originally designed and constructed in 1927/8, complete with forestage set up for orchestra.
Columbus, Ohio; and Oakland, California, other cities are saving, restoring and/or reusing picture theatres as performing arts/live theatre venues. Some examples are Indianapolis (Indiana), New Haven (Connecticut), Fort Worth, Austin, Galveston, Texarkana and Dallas (Texas); Cleveland (Ohio) where four in one street block have been purchased for restoration; Aurora, Joliet and De Kalb (Illinois); Memphis (Tennessee); Akron (Ohio), Hershey (Pennsylvania), Tacoma (Washington), Madison (Wisconsin), Winston-Salem (Nth. Carolina), Miami (Florida), New York (N.Y.) Los Angeles and San Francisco (California).35

To Australians many of these cities are unknown and certainly smaller in population than Sydney. A few of the examples mentioned are slightly more elaborate in the interior architectural decoration than the Capitol but a significant number of them are inferior to the Capitol. A few years ago it was known that 50 major movie houses had been saved in USA35d. On a population basis Australia would need to save four, perhaps five comparable picture palaces if the community considered such historic preservation as importantly as Americans. Already it is too late as there are only four major city examples of picture palace theatre architecture remaining without alteration in Australia - three in Sydney and one in Melbourne. The Capitol interior is the only one remaining intact of the atmospheric style.

The Non-Argument of "Its too dilapidated" or "Its only a vulgar pastiche".

In the latter half of the nineteenth century Georgian architecture of the first forty years of the century was frequently considered too plain and not worth keeping. The Sydney Barracks was earmarked for demolition because it was an eyesore, and dilapidated, yet more recently we have seen fit to retain it and indeed, take the trouble to individually turn around each brick of the exterior walls.

In the first half of this century Victorian architecture was reviled for its vulgar profusion of "coarse" and "ugly" decorative detail. And now it is lovingly cared for, with previously removed decoration now being replaced where possible.

As for shear dilapidation some houses of importance historically, but not the only ones extant of a particular style or by a particular architect, have been largely in ruin with almost no detailed building work such as stairways, fireplace surrounds, doors, architraves or window sashes (such as at Lyndhurst
at Glebe) yet have been considered suitable for an expensive restoration. By comparison the dilapidation at the Capitol is miniscule and the existence of statuary and furnishings elsewhere allow reproductions to be made; and the existence of the detailed drawings also allows new pieces to be reconstructed with relative ease.
SECTION 4 Restoration and Re-Use of a Theatre as a Performing Arts Venue Promotes Redevelopment

In October 1981 a national (U.S.) conference was held in Pittsburgh (and attended by over 400 public officials, corporate and business leaders, planners, arts administrators and architects) to explore the role of the arts in urban economics, and the use of culture planning in attracting people, business and money into declining areas of cities. In the light of this conference the Capitol Theatre would be seen as an asset-nucleus about which a cultural plan could be evolved by a community task force consisting of major business leaders, City and State government officials and representatives of commercial and non-profit arts organisations and related unions.

Earlier in 1981 another conference was held at the Graduate School of Business and Public Administration of Cornell University. The content of this conference had an even greater emphasis on the economics of the arts and how tangible those benefits are to business and the community outside the arts organisation or arts facility involved. In considering the arts in terms of economics the financial difficulties of the arts organisations are usually the only aspect taken into account but, as one conference speaker noted, "the arts can stimulate economic vitality without alleviating their own chronic distress". One example of how a performing arts centre can generate development and income to the City is the Lincoln Center, New York. Values of adjacent properties have risen so much that the New York City Council netts an additional $30 million per annum in rate income. Buffalo "is rebuilding its decaying downtown around a theater district that includes the restored Shea's Buffalo Theater ...." In Cleveland "the Playhouse Square Foundation is restoring three huge downtown theaters as the first step in a long-range scheme for creating new offices, hotels and Light Museum along historic Euclid Avenue".

In New Haven, Fort Worth and Galveston restored theatres are being used to anchor redevelopment efforts. In Aurora, Illinois the city was "virtually a slum". Yet, the renovation of the Paramount Theatre into a performing arts centre in the downtown area acted as a catalyst. "Aurora has changed its image from
Playhouse Square, Cleveland, Ohio. Promotional material published by the Playhouse Square Foundation for the general revitalisation of the district and its five restored theatres on Euclid Avenue.
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1. From an undated (before 1893) plan of the block over which is marked in red a proposal to insert Parker Street and subdivide seven lots between Parker and George Street (Sydney City Council Archives).

2. Vade Mecum, Sydney City Council, 1941, p.146.


6. Ibid, p.86.


8. Ibid., p.13.


10. There also existed an "Old" Belmore Market Building on the adjacent site bounded by Pitt, Campbell, Castlereagh and Hay Streets. City Council Map SN/-4, and Vade Macum 1941, p.146.


18. Ibid., Finance Committee Report 18 September 1912, carried by Council on 24 September; p.316.


23. Sydney Morning Herald, 4 April 1916.


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27. The Argus, June 6, 1927.


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31. Ibid., p.4.

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35. This partial list has been derived from the following articles.
   
   
   
   
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