

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF PARRAMATTA: THE RESTORATION AND RE-USE OF THE ROXY THEATRE

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Image: Ian C Griggs

The Roxy Theatre is listed on the State Heritage Register for NSW; classified by the National Trust, and listed as a heritage building also by Parramatta City Council. It is also listed on the Register of the National Estate and the Register of the Royal Institute of Archives. To be listed on five such registers already makes it a unique, important, and irreplaceable heritage building. This submission is about a vision for the future of the new Parramatta, and restoring the Roxy for use as a major world class performing arts theatre, the centrepiece of Parramatta, in order to make it a future centre of community, social and cultural importance for the people of Parramatta and the Western Suburbs.

The Roxy was built in 1930 in a Spanish baroque style, and most of this still exists within and outside the building, apart from the original proscenium arch, which was removed in 1976 when three cinemas were incorporated into the theatre. With the proscenium now gone and not an encumbrance, there is the opportunity to build a wider, larger stage, using part of the car park at the rear, and for the Roxy to be the stage venue for major theatre presentations for the West.

The theatre has a strong connection to people, children and adults alike, as it is seen as being synonymous with Parramatta and a building of major heritage significance, as well as the 20th century phenomenon of going to the movies. No other centre in Australia has a theatre of this style of Spanish architecture. Parramatta Council and the State Government now have a rare opportunity to acquire the Roxy, and restore it in line with their recent statements concerning the needs of the people of the West

As Parramatta CBD redevelops over the next decades, with the restored Roxy as its centrepiece and heart, it will need to become a city of culture and social interaction rather than one of streets of high rise glass buildings. The Roxy would also bring life to the CBD at night, and help to support cafes, restaurants and other commercial activities which would benefit from its presence.

In 2019 the Land and Environment Commission, following the submission of plans to demolish half the theatre and build a 33 storey tower were rejected by Parramatta City Council, held two lengthy hearings into the theatre's listing on the State Heritage Register, and confirmed its significance, rejecting the tower scheme.

Parramatta now has an opportunity to acquire this iconic building and restore it as a world class performing arts theatre with a new stage and flytower at the rear. This could be achieved at the conclusion of the proposed Metro railway station works project. The developer of the tower over that site could be required to restore the Roxy, build the new stage, and be given additional levels on his proposed tower/s to compensate. This would mean that restoration would have to wait until the Metro excavation is completed, but it would be a small price to pay for such an outcome. In the meantime, the theatre could be stabilised and basic maintenance carried out.

Even though Parramatta has its Riverside Theatres, these have design problems and foyer space issues. Various proposals to refurbish or even build new theatres have yet to come to fruition. There is no reason that Riverside and Roxy could not work together, and Parramatta is a city with a large regional population and can easily support three theatres of different sizes and performance types.

The Roxy would provide a large auditorium with full facilities for staging Bollywood type shows for the large Indian community in the Parramatta Blacktown area. It could also be used for special event film screenings, as the Sydney State and Melbourne Regent occasionally do. Theatre tours are also an option. The Sydney State and Capitol Theatres, the Sydney Opera House, Toowoomba Empire and Newcastle Civic all offer guided tours, run by volunteers. They can be a tourist attraction in themselves. And the benefit to local business, in terms of restaurants, cafes, accommodation, would be incalculable.

The Roxy's location on the edge of Council's proposed Civic Link, and so close to Eat Street, would be an added bonus to bringing after hours life to the city.

In 2014 the Castle Hill Entertainment Centre was demolished to allow for a new rail link, so The Hills district has no performing arts theatre. Nor does Blacktown, nor Liverpool, nor Richmond or the Blue Mountains. People in these areas would benefit from a major theatre space in Parramatta with productions on a large scale. Rooty Hill has the new Coliseum Theatre (2019) but although this is more a club style centre, it is unlikely to attract patrons from the Parramatta-Hills region.

The restoration of old theatres has been shown in other places to be of immense value to their communities.

In 1993 the Newcastle Civic – a fabulous Henry E White designed classical style picture theatre, built in 1929, underwent an \$8m refurbishment to give it major stage facilities, extend foyers, install bars upgrade public areas and substantial structural alterations. The result has been seen as a major live theatre of the Hunter region, and gives Newcastle CBD

a cultural heart. It underwent further minor modifications in 2020 while closed for the covid-19 shutdown.

In 2015, it was announced that the historic 1892 Victoria Theatre in Newcastle, closed as a cinema in 1966 and little used since, is to be restored and reopened as a theatre by Century Venues, the operators of the successful Enmore Theatre. The latter is also about to undergo minor restoration, including to reinstate the original auditorium light fittings.

In Toowoomba, Qld, a closed 2,000 seat movie theatre, the Empire, in poor condition after decades of use and misuse as a carpentry workshop, was fully restored. Its on-going success brought about the construction of two additional theatres in the same precinct.

Melbourne is perhaps the chief beneficiary of the restoration of old heritage theatres. It was estimated [up until the pandemic] that the five city theatres brought some \$460 million into the State economy every year. In 2019 the Regent Theatre underwent a \$16m refurbishment. And recently a sixth theatre, the Walter Burley-Griffin designed Capitol, has also undergone and extensive restoration.

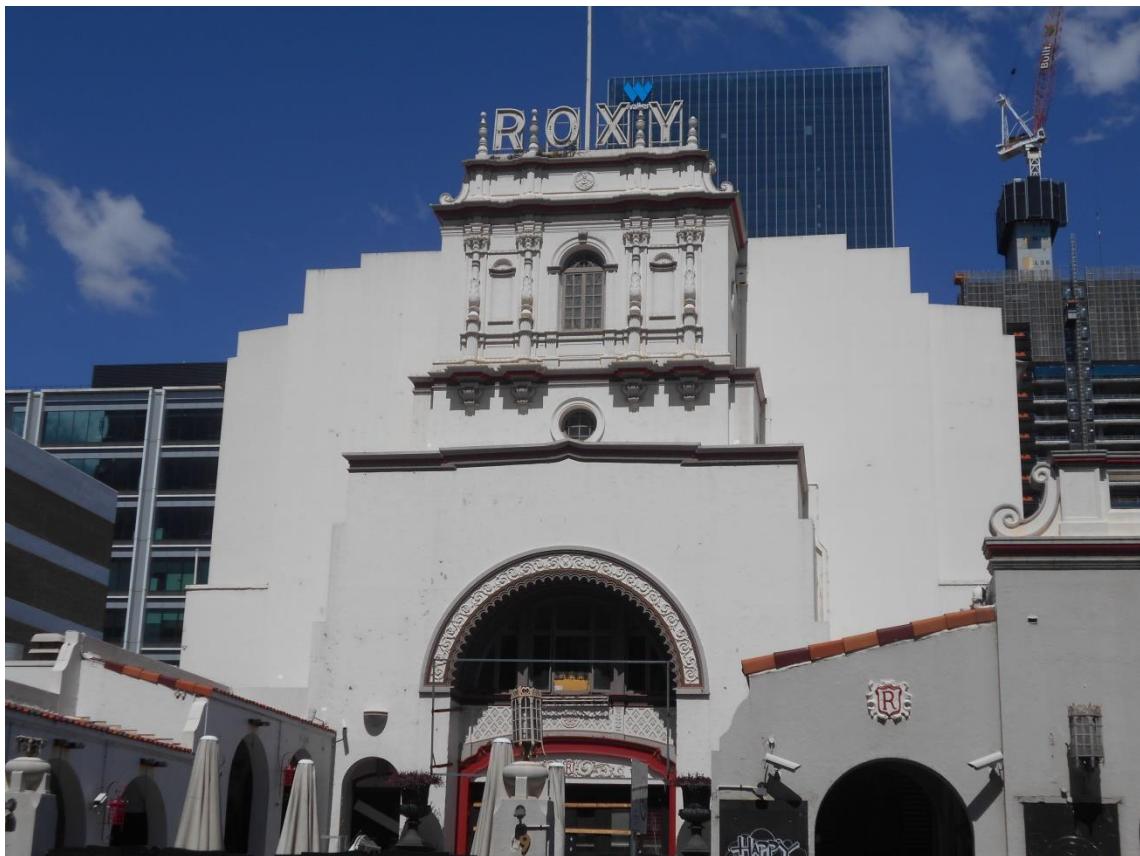
Sydney restored its Italian style atmospheric Capitol Theatre from an almost ruined hulk, into a magnificent theatre building, The Theatre Royal is presently undergoing a major \$30 million restoration, and the State Theatre also has been refurbished.

Don't allow Parramatta to get left behind. The Roxy is a Parramatta icon. It is also one of Australia's major theatre buildings of architectural importance. It makes a major contribution to the streetscape, is of aesthetic significance, and has a special and strong association with the community for both social and cultural reasons.

The Roxy Theatre is important in exemplifying the early symbiosis of film theatre and social interaction. The building is important historically for its close association with the expansion of mass entertainment in Parramatta in the first half of the 20th century, and survives as a rare and important evidence of the increasingly sophisticated expectations of interwar cinema audiences. But now is the time for it to take on a newer role, that of a live performance theatre, the jewel in Parramatta's entertainment crown.

The issue of the future of the Roxy is bound up with the Government and Council's proposals to redevelop Parramatta as a future city to rival Sydney CBD. But to do this, both need to look closely at the retention of heritage buildings, otherwise they will be creating a soul-less city of steel and glass towers, and one completely lacking in tourism. A city is a collection of buildings reflecting the architectural styles of its history. What distinguishes one city from another is the quality of its built environment which give a city its character. If a city is to retain its special quality and not become indistinguishable from another, then its Council and State Government must fulfil their duty as custodians to protect its heritage. Heritage itself should not be seen as a drawback, but as an opportunity.

With a revamped Roxy, large scale productions such as *Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera* and many others would be possible. The former stalls and stage area, stripped of most of its original decorations, can easily be re-instated from photographs, (as was the Plaza Theatre in Melbourne some years ago) but on a larger, modern scale. The Roxy would also be a cultural selling point for the thousands of apartments planned for Parramatta over the next 20 years.



Even in its present state, the Roxy is still an awesome building. Photo: Les Tod

The State Government of NSW is quite aware of the cultural facilities – or dearth of – in Sydney’s western suburbs. It regularly makes announcements regarding its concerns about the western suburbs being overlooked and neglected. Here is a rare – and once only opportunity – to acquire the Roxy and make it the centrepiece of a new Parramatta, while also adding desperately needed facilities to the City and its surrounding areas.

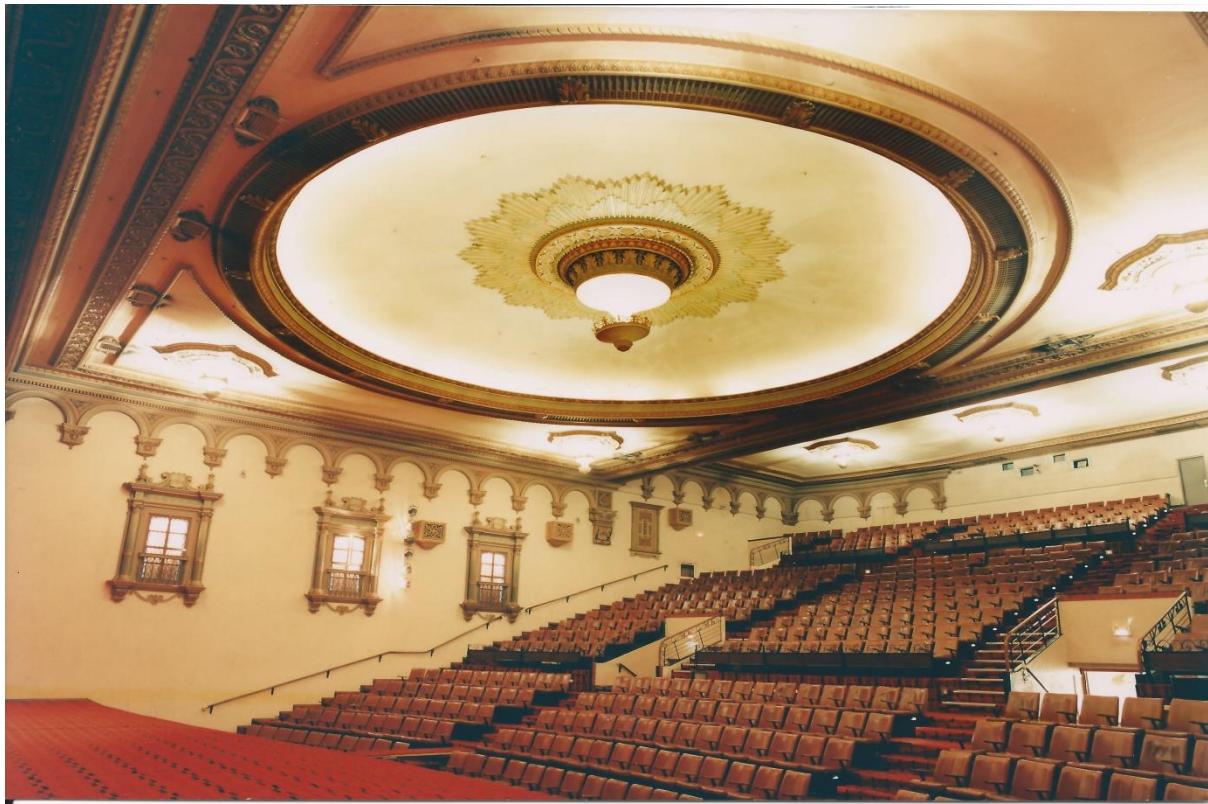
Parramatta has already become the demographic centre of Sydney and by mid-century almost eight million people will live in Western Sydney. The future of Sydney, it has recently been stated, will be determined in the West.

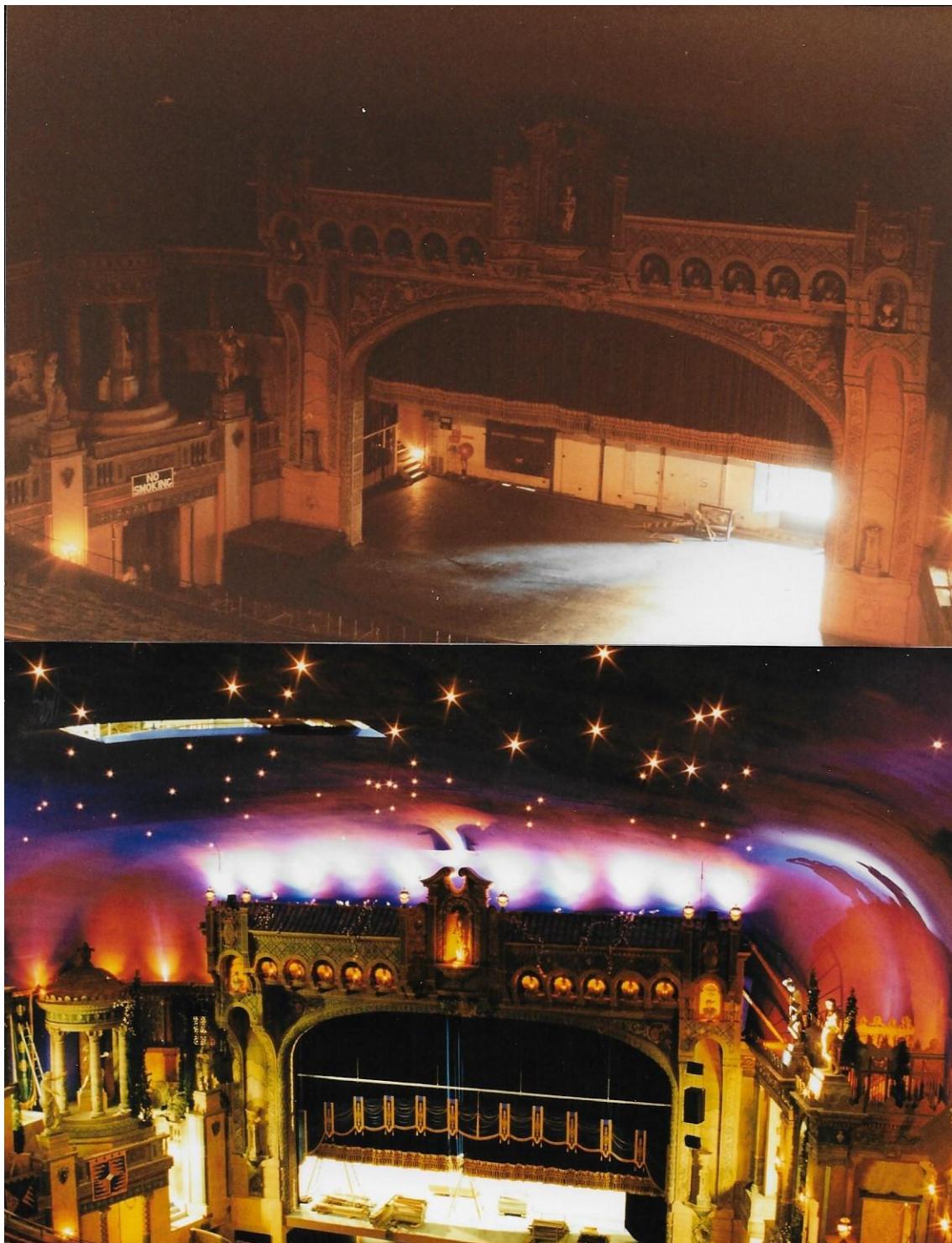
The Government and Parramatta City Council need to demonstrate vision and leadership and make the Roxy once again, Parramatta’s showpiece theatre and give the people of the western suburbs an outstanding cultural icon.

The Roxy should be a priority in terms of arts and cultural expenditure and part of the State Government’s entertainment and arts precinct planned for the area around the new Powerhouse Museum and the Civic Link.



The Roxy as it is today, the former dress circle converted to a 600 seat cinema, but disused once the hotel occupied the stalls and foyer level. Photos: the late Ron Israel.



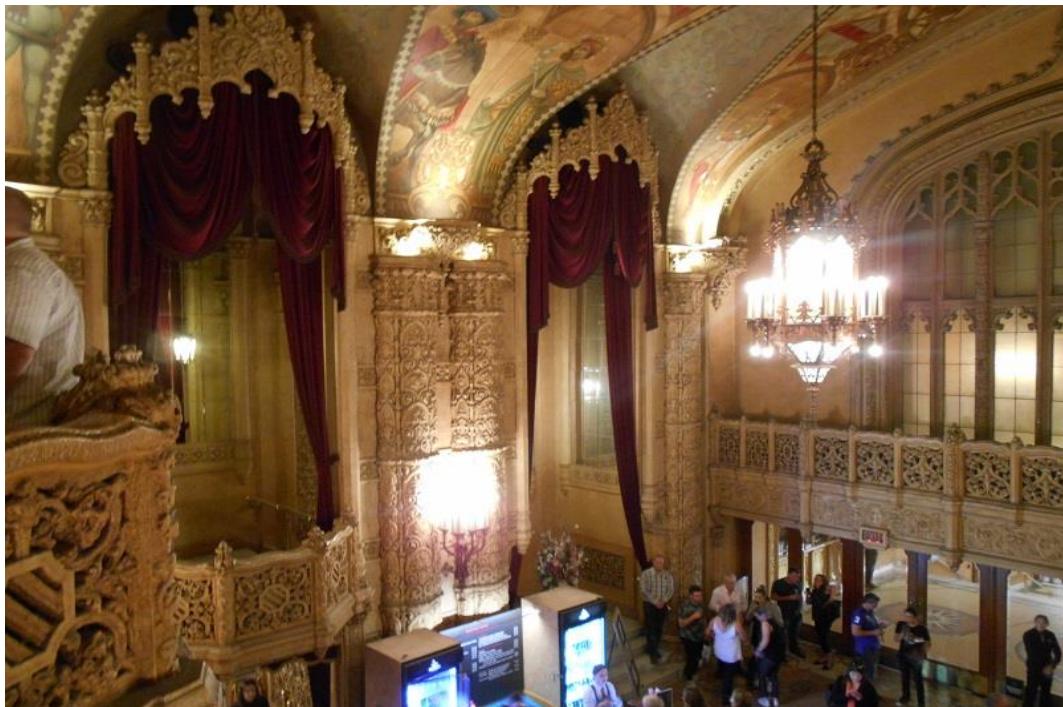


Sydney Capitol before and after restoration. Owned by Sydney City Council.

Photos: Les Tod



Newcastle Civic. Owned by Newcastle City Council. Image by Les Tod.



Melbourne Regent foyer, 2019. Photo by Les Tod



Toowoomba Empire Theatre fully restored after 20 years as a carpentry workshop for the local TAFE and now owned by Toowoomba City Council.

. Photos by Les Tod.



The exterior has new foyer space and a massive fly tower and stage, capable of presenting any type of performance.

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“There is nothing so exhilarating as a splendid Theatre.” - Watkin Tench.