



CONTENTS

FEATURES

Adelaide's Inter-War Flats
A new form of housing for a new world
by Fran Smith

Frances Burke - Textiles
by Helen Graham

The Cremorne Orpheum
A special case for heritage listing
by Dr Peter Sheridan AM

Regional Victoria
Bushfires and Art Deco hotels
by Robin Grow

Off to the World Congress, 1991 to 2023
by Robin Grow

Sydney Gothic Revival - Read all about it!
Part 2 - The Sun Rises over Sydney
by Barry Clare

SPIRIT OF PROGRESS

JOURNAL OF ART DECO AND MODERNISM SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA INC.

issue

9

Spring 2023
volume 23 number 1

THE CREMORNE ORPHEUM

Dr Peter Sheridan AM

A SPECIAL CASE FOR HERITAGE LISTING



IMAGES

All images,
Peter Sheridan

LEFT:

Hayden Orpheum
Picture Palace street
façade, night view

RIGHT:

Nordic Lady, main
Orpheum Theatre
alcove

The original Orpheum Picture theatre was opened in 1912 in Alfred Street North Sydney by Angelo Virgona. The Virgona family had arrived in Sydney in the 1880s from Salina, one of the Aeolian Islands off the coast of Sicily. Originally fruiterers in Circular Quay and North Sydney, the Virgonas were entrepreneurial, with brother Frank having seen moving pictures in the USA and convincing Angelo to build a movie theatre. By 1915 the North Side had several other cinema/theatres – the Union De Luxe and Coliseum in North Sydney, the Queens Theatre in Crows Nest and the Cremorne Theatre in Cremorne. In 1924 the Virgonas opened the second Orpheum Theatre, designed by Roseville-based architect C Reynolds Winter, with classical styling. Seating 2000 people, adults paid eight pence for an ordinary seat and one shilling for premium while children were half price.

The silent films needed musical accompaniment so shows at the North Sydney Orpheum were part recorded performance and part live act. The Hollywood movie, *A Dangerous Woman*, was still a new release in America when it was the first talkie shown at the Orpheum in 1929. It shared the billing with the 1928 silent film *Revenge*. Despite the change to talkies, Al Higginbotham and his Bohemians continued to play their music to warm up the audience.

At the end of 1929 stock markets crashed in the USA and the Great Depression spread worldwide. The worst year in Australia was 1932, the same year the Harbour Bridge was completed. Very few new buildings were constructed

in Australia from 1930 to 1935, but many areas of North Sydney were demolished to widen access to the Harbour Bridge. The Orpheum was spared and at the same time the Virgona family were planning for a second theatre on Military Road in Cremorne directly opposite the old Cremorne Picture theatre which had become a dance hall.

The architect for the new project was George Kenworthy, who specialised in cinema design. He had expertise in acoustics, decoration and lighting (the new theatre had more than 2000 lights). Plans were approved at the end of 1934 with the cost estimated at £25,250. As with the first Orpheum the new theatre included shops – six in all, facing the main street. Whereas the North Sydney Orpheum was inspired by classical architecture, the new cinema showed a contemporary design that would in later decades be called Inter-War but is today is appreciated as a quintessential example of the design movement, Art Deco. In the 1930s the style, with its elegant geometric lines and motifs, was just called Modern.

The Cremorne Orpheum was grander than most suburban theatres, designed to compete with city theatres. It was built in the decade of sound and colour revolutions and the advance of the 'talkies'. During this time there was also further development of film genres (gangster films, musicals, newspaper-reporting films, historical biopics, social-realism films, light-hearted screwball comedies, westerns and horror movies). *It was the dream of Angelo Virgona, the Managing Director of Orpheum Ltd, to offer*



to the public a theatre equal to anything in the world, and to stimulate in the residents of the North Shore a keener interest in a thriving centre that can be made another Sydney' (Orpheum Souvenir Booklet 1935).

The original exterior design of the Orpheum exhibited a major horizontal configuration with a series of fenestrations and parapets stepping up to the tower effect over the main entrance which featured a double-sided neon sign. Adjacent to the entrance was a row of six shops, on top of which was a spacious hall the extent of which can be seen by the first-floor bank of windows. The so-called Orpheum Club was employed for a variety of social functions. The entrance to the cinema was impressively defined with a stepped awning as well as metal and glass light prisms over the doors.

The evolution of the Art Deco style can be seen in Sydney's remaining theatres. The Art Deco style of the exterior of the Orpheum has clear similarities with the Ritz, the Enmore, the Orion, the Roseville and the Valhalla theatres all being built between 1935 and 1937. The Clovelly Kings and the Collaroy Theatres built in 1938 and 1939 show a more Functionalist Art Deco style with rounded corners, whereas the Metro/Minerva of 1939 in Kings Cross stands apart being more in the Streamlined Art Deco style as does the Crest Theatre from c1948.

The interior of the Orpheum was opulent, seating 1735 people over two levels (mezzanine and stalls), with excellent vision from every seat because there were no

support columns. The theatre could host both films and live musicals. Backstage there were dressing rooms, an orchestra pit, and above the stage a functioning fly-tower to store and 'fly' scenery.

The side walls, ceiling lights and stage surrounds all displayed Art Deco designs and motifs, with an array of colour schemes accentuated by wall and ceiling lights. The side walls were adorned with intricate and elaborate angular plaster decoration including chevrons, sun's rays and parallel lines. The overhead lighting in the auditorium was ambitious and modern with no chandeliers, light coming from a series of panels and light troughs running along the ceiling, serving as both lighting and ceiling decoration. The acoustics of the theatre included a Fibrolite® roof rather than galvanised iron which eliminated noise from rain. The seats all had special Dunlopillo® cushioning for enhanced comfort. The Nordic ladies holding two lit umbrella suns in their alcoves flanking the stage were partially clad for children's matinee decency.

Double flights of stairs rose from the main entrance to the dress circle foyer. Some 25 metres long, the foyer was luxuriously furnished and tastefully decorated and illuminated. It had a soda fountain and a series of alcoves fitted with upholstered lounges enabling a party to have refreshments at interval or after the show.

Chains such as Hoyts exclusively showed first release pictures – the Orpheum films were usually a year old at screening. In the 1940s the Cremorne and North Sydney

ABOVE:
Orpheum Theatre
interior



MAIN:
Hayden Theatre
interior

LEFT:
Art Deco lady,
Hayden Theatre

Orpheums shared the same programs and with just one print between two cinemas, the Virgonas needed to get the film quickly between venues – sometimes a first reel was rushed off to Cremorne from North Sydney while the second was still playing. Apparently, the local police looked upon Robert Virgona's speeding with leniency. Live theatre was presented from the mid-1930s till the early 1960s with, for example, the Mosman Musical Society performing *The Student Prince* in 1938 and The Sydney Light Opera Company presenting *Oklahoma* in 1959 and *The King and I* in 1960.

Competition was increasing in the late 1930s and again after the war from 1945 with over a dozen Art Deco theatres located on the Lower North Shore. In nearby Crows Nest the revamped Queens (called the Sesqui from 1938-1952) rivalled the Orpheum with an elegant Art Deco streetscape.

In 1956 television came to Australia as well as the drive ins and movie theatre attendances halved in the 1960s from 140 million admissions yearly from 1930-1950 to 70 million in the 1960s and even further to 55 million admissions in 1980s and 90s with the addition of home video cassette recorders (VCR). Incidentally, admissions increased again between 2000 and 2020 to 80 million admissions but in 2020 plummeted with Covid to some 40 million admissions a year.

The Cremorne Orpheum struggled on during the 1960s but gradually became run down and was closed in 1977

being sold to developers in 1979. In the mid-1980s it was turned into a small shopping arcade and gym with the main theatre closed and unused.

In December 1986 Mike Walsh bought the Orpheum, initially spending \$2.5 million on its restoration. Mike Walsh had a distinguished career as television and radio presenter, actor, media personality and theatre owner. He was honoured with an OBE in 1980 and then in 2016 received an AM for significant service to the entertainment industry and to the performing arts through support for young actors, theatre restoration and production. His middle name is Hayden, hence the change of name from Orpheum to Hayden Orpheum.

Working with noted theatre historian and designer, John Love, Walsh's restoration was initially restricted to restoring the old dress circle area, and the gym – the former ballroom – into what are now The Orpheum and The Lounge cinemas. The beautiful dress circle foyer and Piano Bar upstairs were recreated, along with original Art Deco details such as ornate atmospheric lighting, ceiling motifs and specially designed carpet. John Love was the creative designer for the overall plan to restore the original auditorium and incorporate five new cinemas in addition to the existing ancillary areas. The old light fittings were restored plus sensitive addition of new ceiling and wall lighting.

The renovations to the main Orpheum auditorium used only the original upper mezzanine level extending it to the front of the stage which itself was brought forward. This reduced the seating capacity to 700 patrons but created space below in the stalls area for another smaller theatre. In the original 1935 design there was a space created for a retractable organ via an elevator lift under the main stage, but it was never installed. In the 1987 refurbishment Walsh installed a 1925 Wurlitzer pipe organ originally sited in the



Wilson Theatre in Fresno, California. Neil Jensen has been the resident organist since its opening performance in 1987 and is enormously popular with a regular timetable playing prior to movie sessions. He is the longest-serving theatre organist in Australasian cinema theatre history and also the caretaker of the Wurlitzer organ, overseeing its restorations over the years but also modernising elements of it, such as implementing computerised control systems.

The restored interior of the Orpheum replicates all the original Art Deco fittings, colour schemes, lighting and design, with quite a few salvaged from the Art Deco Embassy theatre in the city that was being demolished at the same time. Initially Mike Walsh tried to secure the arcade area and install more screens, but ultimately chose to carve new cinemas into the sandstone upon which the original theatre was built.

A spectacularly restored Hayden Orpheum, at this point with two theatres, had a grand opening on December 9, 1987. The National Trust considered the Orpheum at the time to be 'the finest example of an Art Deco Cinema in Sydney' and subsequently listed the main theatre on their national register.

The Lounge Theatre seating 164 patrons has a dome in the centre of the ceiling which is a copy of one in the Paramount Theater in Oakland, California. The wall lights are heraldic in the Art Deco style. In 1992 the Hayden Theatre was added, seating 121 patrons. The major visual feature of this cinema is the beautiful leadlight designed Art Deco Lady, back-lit with coloured neon. She is a modern goddess of the early 20th century with an Egyptian sensibility. The shell lights along the wall are from the demolished Embassy Theatre in Castlereagh Street.

In 1996 the Walsh Theatre was completed, although it was originally going to be called the Virgona. The arched figure of a beautiful young woman on the wall pays tribute to

the leaping sprites in the now-lost newsreel theatre in the basement of the Century Building in Melbourne which itself was inspired by the 1937 Odeon in Leicester Square, London. She is more speed and machine-age than the Egyptian influenced lady in the Hayden, but both are symbolic of different expressions of the Art Deco style.

The Rex Theatre was completed in 2000 and named after Mike Walsh's hometown theatre the Rex, in Corowa, near Albury, in country New South Wales. The walls are dominated by eight-pointed stars and the plasterwork is a copy of pieces John Love salvaged during the demolition of the Capitol Cinema in Canterbury. The Arcadia Theatre seating 200 patrons also opened in 2000 and was named after the demolished theatre of the same name in Chatswood. It celebrates the Sydney Olympics of that year with Australian green and gold colours. The sculptural motif on the walls of an athlete in full flight is said to be based on the Australian sprinter Matt Shirvington.

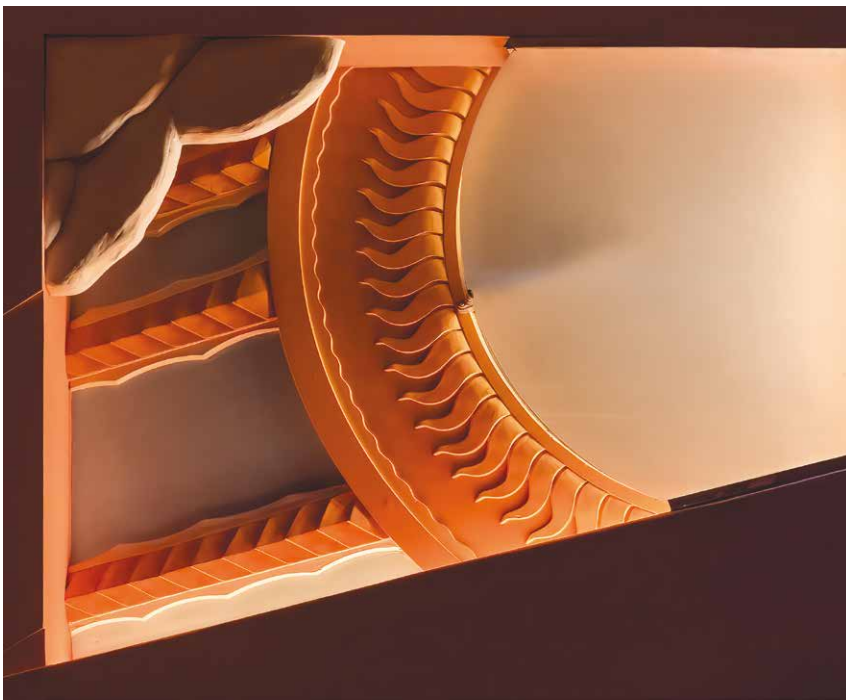
The main entrance to the complex is full of Deco detail including a wonderful terrazzo patterned floor. The Box office grill and the silver Deco panel on the left of the box office came from the demolished Embassy Theatre in Castlereagh Street. The confectionary counter evokes memories for those of us who were around in the good old days.

The five new cinemas are not typical modern featureless movie theatres. One would expect the restored main



MAIN:
Walsh Theatre interior

RIGHT:
Art Deco lady, Walsh Theatre



UPPER:
Dress Circle foyer
(upstairs)

LEFT:
Orpheum Theatre,
'sunray' wall detail

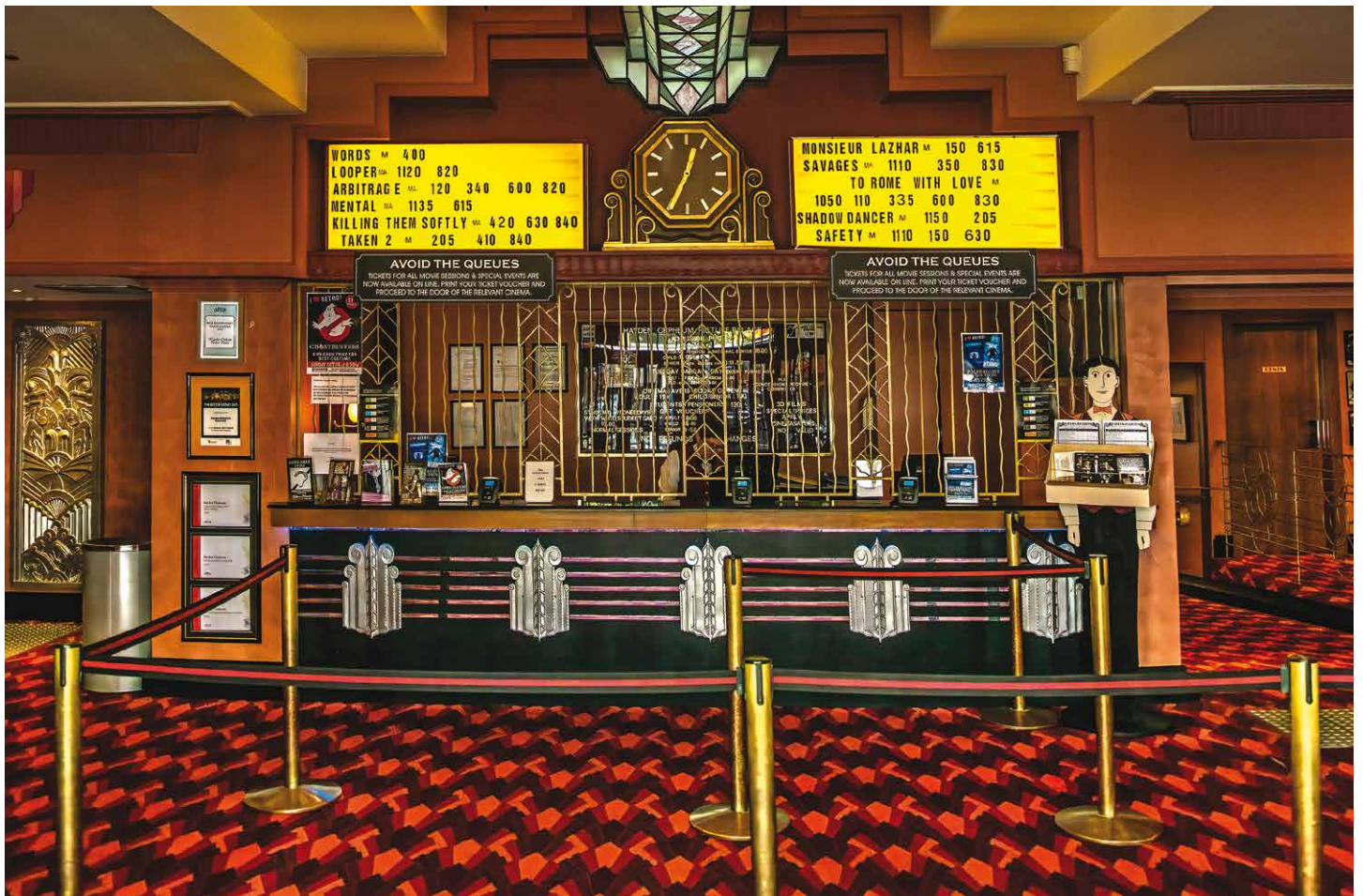
RIGHT:
Orpheum Theatre
detail

Orpheum auditorium to be special, (which it is) but in fact all the cinemas are unique and together they all contribute to a coherent mosaic of an irreplaceable Art Deco picture palace – the only one of its kind in Sydney. The restored Orpheum Theatre is the original diamond and the five other new theatres complementary jewels, all reinforcing the Art Deco heritage. The totality is generally unappreciated because you only go to one theatre at a time. Today the Hayden Orpheum is a treasure highly regarded for its contribution, both as a functioning and successful movie and event theatre and as a significant part of Sydney's movie and architectural heritage.

In 1936 when the Orpheum was built there were 1334 cinemas in Australia and some 250 in Sydney. Today, Sydney has 50 cinemas which provide 200 different screens for movies. From 1930 to 1950 there were 135 million cinema admissions per year in Australia from a population of 6 million. Today the admissions have plummeted to some 30 million per year from a larger population of 25 million.

The impact of TV, phones, iPads and streaming services make cinema-going an endangered pastime. Live theatre will survive but cinema theatres will need to be extraordinarily entrepreneurial to lure people out of their homes to watch movies on the big screen. IMAX, 3D, gold star environments and high-tech facilities are obvious attractions, but the future seems precarious. There is something pleasurable about the collective experience of watching a movie, particularly if the surroundings transport one to another world of nostalgia and glamour such as is found at the Cremorne (Hayden) Orpheum Picture Palace.

Thanks to Dr Ian Hoskins (Historian at North Sydney Council) for the early history of the Orpheum Theatre and the Virgona family, and to Fiona Gracie from the Cremorne Conservation Group for reviewing the Summary.



HERITAGE LISTING SUPPORT SUMMARY

North Sydney Council with the support of the Cremorne Conservation Group is currently promoting the heritage listing of the Cremorne (Hayden) Orpheum to the NSW State Government.

Sydney has 13 remaining Art Deco theatres of which the Cremorne (Hayden) Orpheum Theatre is one of seven still functioning with movies and/or live theatre. The cinemas built during the 1930s reflect the extraordinary significance of movies in the lifestyle of Sydneysiders in the first half of the 20th century when it was the most popular form of entertainment in Australia. The Cremorne Orpheum was constructed during the most creative period of cinematic design in Australia and at the time there were some 250 cinemas in Sydney many of which were built in the Art Deco style. In its original 1935 iteration it was grander than most suburban theatres and intended to provide suburban competition with the Art Deco style theatres in the Sydney CBD (all of which have been demolished). In fact, the Orpheum is the best and only example in Sydney of the grand picture palaces in the Art Deco style, with the State Theatre representing the Classical style and the Capitol Theatre the Atmospheric style of picture palaces.

Four of the 13 Art Deco theatres in Sydney are State heritage listed. The State Theatre has only a minimal Art Deco relevance relating to the shopfront additions of 1937 with its major heritage value being the gothic and baroque classic interiors. The Ritz Theatre in Randwick is an excellent example of Aaron Bolot's design for a suburban theatre. The Metro/Minerva Theatre in Potts Point (only State heritage listed in 2020) and the Roxy

Theatre in Parramatta are both unrestored and under threat from commercial development which would severely compromise their value as heritage items and use as functioning live theatres and/or cinema. Melbourne, in contrast, has 12 Art Deco cinemas of which 10 are still functioning. Six are State Heritage listed, one pending, and all the others having Local Government protection status.

The Cremorne Orpheum is important from an architectural and design standpoint in both its original (1935) and restored (1987) iterations. It is aesthetically significant because the exterior and interior detailing and remaining fittings and finishes are excellent examples of the best of 1930s crafts and skills.

Its original external configuration was typical of mid-1930s Inter-war Art Deco styling but interiorly was much more lavish with the theatre seating more than 1750 people on two levels, a luxuriously furnished dress circle foyer and all areas adorned with modern geometric motifs and stylish lighting. The architect George Newton Kenworthy was well known for cinema designs being responsible for some 20 theatres including the Savoy in Hurstville and the Regent in Mudgee. He was experienced in acoustics, decoration and lighting, with the Cremorne Orpheum having some 2000 lights. The Orpheum offered live shows as well as movies with a huge lift over the stage able to elevate sets between scenes. A ballroom was constructed on the second level where Friday and Saturday night dances were regularly held. Kenworthy's work helps to trace the evolution of cinema design in Australia and the Orpheum represents a major cultural item in Australia's cinema history.

ABOVE:
Box Office



UPPER:
Lounge Theatre
interior

LEFT:
Arcadia Theatre
interior

RIGHT:
Rex Theatre
interior

The refurbishment of 1987 restored the main auditorium (Orpheum) to its original status and standard now seating 700 people on the original mezzanine level, allowing the stalls area below to accommodate a separate smaller theatre. The ballroom was converted into the Lounge cinema as part of the original restoration. In 1992 and 1996 the Hayden and Walsh theatres were added and in 2000 the Rex and Arcadia Cinemas. A vintage Wurlitzer pipe organ from the USA was installed in the stage in the main auditorium and is regularly played by the resident organist. The additional cinemas are all uniquely decorated in the Art Deco style utilising material or themes from other demolished theatres in Sydney. The result is a six-cinema complex which allows for multiple screens in a modern configuration, but which faithfully maintains the ethos of the original theatre and its Art Deco design theme. Nothing like this exists in Sydney and this mix of new and old functioning in the present yet preserving the feel of cinemas in Sydney in the 1930s, is a template for and a uniquely worthy example of 'adaptive reuse'.

The Cremorne Orpheum is socially significant because it is a record of the cinema culture of the 1930s when people went to the movies multiple times per week and revelled in luxurious surroundings which contrasted with and liberated them from their work and home life. The building has an excellent capacity to interpret aspirations, uses, tastes and importance of cinema in the society of the 1930s.

The Orpheum has significant cultural significance in that the 1935 construction reflects the efforts of an Italian immigrant family which transposed from fruiterers in the 19th century to building movie theatres in the 20th century. The Virgona family became an integral part of the local community in bringing entertainment to the lower North Shore via their movie theatres and being intimately involved in their management for over 70 years. As well, the singular efforts of the TV and radio presenter, Mike Walsh, in restoring the cinema in 1987, expanding its footprint to six theatres all in Art Deco style and maintaining the complex through to the 21st century adds another dimension of commitment and integrity to the social and cultural history of the Orpheum.

As a noteworthy part of Sydney's movie and architectural history and one of the few Art Deco picture palaces in Australia remaining intact and functioning, the Cremorne (Hayden) Orpheum exceeds the threshold for State significance on many levels. It is a significant item that demonstrates strong historic, aesthetic, and representative values, is strongly associated with a well-known specialist architect and well-known immigrant family, and finally, given the demolition or alteration of most Sydney's Art Deco cinemas its faithful restoration has generated a rare, surviving example of its kind. It should be listed on the NSW State Heritage Register as soon as possible.