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Palais Theatre Lower Esplanade, (cnr Cavell Street) St Kilda

There have been four different Palais cinemas in St Kilda, most confusingly, three of them on the Esplanade. The open-air Pictureland opened in 1909 in Alfred Square West and was renamed the Palais from 1914-15. It closed and was demolished in 1916. The open-air Elite Biograph opened in 1912, on the corner of Barkly and Acland Street, and became the Palais from 1915-18. It was demolished in 1921.

The St Kilda Lower Esplanade beachfront is Crown Land. In 1906, a Foreshore Committee was formed to reclaim land, landscape the beach and develop baths, piers and amusements. St Kilda Council reclaimed the land and gardens were formed to the design of Carlo Catani. Baxter's Merry-go-Round was the first amusement tenant on the reclaimed land.

The American Phillips Brothers (Herman and Leon), secured the lease for the land on which they erected Luna Park in 1912 (4) and the large timber Palais de Danse (1913). Cooper recalls the patriotism and civic pride of the Phillips Brothers. When 'fleets of men-o-war came to Melbourne,' they gave the sailors in uniform 'free admission to their beach shows ... their presence of the amusement enterprises of the Phillips Brothers on the St Kilda foreshore, has undoubtedly drawn thousands of holiday-makers to St Kilda'.



The Palais Picture Theatre and Palais de Danse, c.1920-1926

After war was declared, in 1915 the Palais de Danse site became Palais Pictures. This was the third Palais cinema in St Kilda. After the war, in 1919, a steel-framed, arched truss structure was built over the old dance-hall. The hall was then dismantled and re-erected next door, to the north. This ran for a couple of years, and then its interior was entirely redesigned by the important Chicago architect, Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) and his wife Marion Mahoney (1871-1961).

After winning an international competition for the design of the proposed new national capital city, Canberra, the Griffins (37) came to Australia in 1913, and established an office in Melbourne. They were responsible for a series of dramatic and creative urban designs, buildings, magical interiors and a renewed appreciation of the inimitable Australian landscape. These include: the Summit and Glenard estates in Eaglemont (1914 & 16), Newman College (1915-18), the Capitol Theatre and Capitol House, Swanston Street (1924) and Castlecrag estate and various houses in Sydney (1921-35).

The Griffins' short-lived interior for the relocated old timber Palais de Danse was an interesting Modernist design of purely geometrical elements, in a sequence of ascending vertical chevron panels, like vertebrae. The gently arched ceiling was supported on organic trunks, with umbrella branches in folded, prismatic forms. It seated as many as 2,870 patrons. Its triangular entrance awning was supported on staggered columns. Some of Griffins' drawings for this survive.

It is remembered for its magical atmosphere. Although supported by abstracted Doric columns, the frieze above was entirely Modernist, with complex, prismatic panels up lit. On hot nights, the louvred wall panels hinged up, to capture sea breezes wafting off the bay. It was the first of several commissions for the Griffins from the Phillips Brothers. None of Griffins' drawings for this remarkable interior survive.

Griffin, with Eric M. Nichols, also prepared designs in 1925-26 (no drawings survive) for landscaping the entire Lower Esplanade, from the Sea Baths to Luna Park, including prismatic leadlight lighting standards, some of which survived in situ until relatively recently. One concrete standard remains, now at Brooks Jetty, opposite Shakespeare Grove, and two pylons, relocated.

The Griffin lamps form an important motif in four expressive paintings by Charles Blackman, such as *Self Portrait with Griffin Light* (1952) and two by Kenneth Jack: *Luna Park, St Kilda* (1959 and 1961).



'Some scraps' of the Griffins' interior remained until 1969, when it too was burnt to the ground. There is a photograph and brief description by Robin Boyd in his *Victorian Modern* written in 1947,

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although Boyd confuses the photographs of Griffin's Palais Pictures he includes, by captioning it the 'Palais de Danse'.

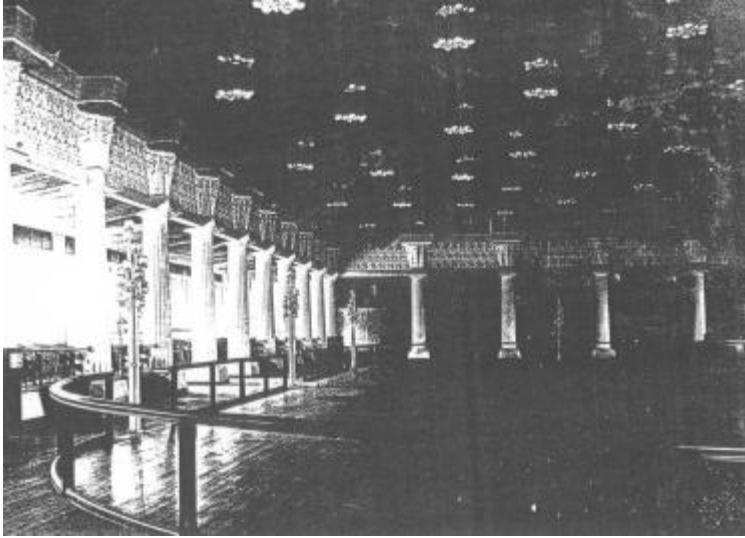
In 1922, just as the Capitol was being constructed, the Griffins prepared a design for a complete new facade, entrance loggia and awning in reinforced concrete for Palais Pictures.

The only drawings known are details and a view of the front elevation at night.

Construction of these works began in 1925, but was

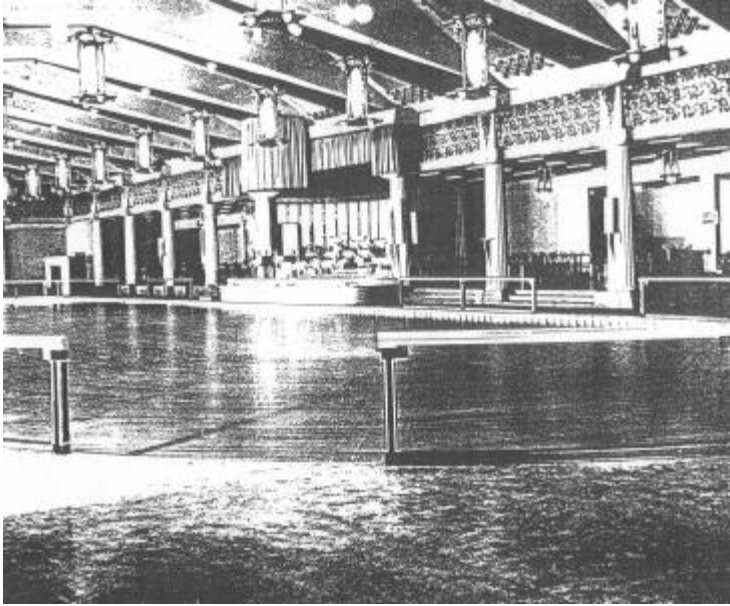
erior Columns in
Burley Griffin's
Palais Pictures

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Interior of Burley Griffin's Palais Pictures (1), c.1926

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Interior of Burley Griffin's Palais Pictures (2), c.1926

destroyed by a fire which ignited the stage-set in February 1926, just before completion. There is a painting of a fire at the building by Sidney Nolan in 1945. Presumably this depicts the fire nineteen years earlier. The fire convinced the Phillips brothers to erect a much grander and splendid theatre on the site. For this ambitious enterprise they commissioned the extremely experienced theatre architect Henry E. White. By this time, the Griffins had moved on to Castlecrag, in Sydney.

So the present, fourth Palais Pictures was designed in 1926 by Henry E. White (c1888-1952) of Sydney. White's Melbourne office was in Capitol House. The Phillips brothers, his clients, were also directors of the company that had constructed Capitol House. White had designed over 130 cinemas and theatres in Australia and New Zealand in a cornucopia of architectural styles, including the St James, Sydney (1926); the Palace, Melbourne (1921-23), as well as remodelling the Princess' and the Athenaeum, the Wintergarden, Rose Bay; the Civic, Newcastle and the fabulous State, Sydney (1929) with John Ebersson of New York.

White was enterprising and loved designing. After a background in engineering projects, he became interested in theatre by going to performances frequently. He longed to design the perfect theatre. At age 23 he designed a theatre in Christchurch for the Fuller brothers, owners of the Princess' and in 1913, a number of theatres for Hugh D. McIntosh. White wrote that he saw three essentials to good theatre design, which were frequently overlooked - clear sightlines from every seat, perfect acoustics and an effective ventilation system. He advocated use of steel framing, with cantilevered dress circle and balcony to at least reduce the number of columns to one or two, rather than 12 or 16. Construction commenced in 1926, and it was opened by the Mayor of St Kilda on 11 November 1927, before a private gathering of invited guests.



Palais Pictures, 1929

The new Palais, 'Australia's Wonder Theatre' had 2,968 seats, just larger than the Capitol. Since the Regent (1928) and the State, Melbourne and Sydney (1929-30) were built later, it was Australia's largest. It cost £150,000. Australian labour and materials were insisted upon, except that is for French brocade, London trimmings and Belgian silk velvets.

'No particular period or style has been adopted', Mr White explained. He had frequently adopted Adam neo-Classical and Louis XVI, which he considered would present 'a light and airy daintiness, in curve and outline'. Here, Spanish, Moorish, Venetian and Indian influences have been identified, overlaying the neo-Classical manner. Its ventilation system changed 1200 cubic metres of air per minute. Like the Astor Cinema (1935, 29) the Palais has two open wells in the upper foyer, a spatial effect first used at Griffin's Capitol. Its neon sign is the earliest still operating in Victoria.

As if to anticipate later wide-screen motion pictures, the Palais has a particularly wide proscenium stage (31 metres). Although not as deep (15.5 metres), it had been designed as a live theatre, the stage has been sufficient for its impressive sequence of tenants. Every seat had a clear view. An additional projection room was constructed within the rim of the ceiling dome and suspended from the roof trusses. The impressive chandelier weighs over a tonne.

It was (with the Regent, South Yarra and the Victory (National), St Kilda the first suburban cinema to screen talkies on 3 July 1929, five months after their first Australian exhibition at the Athenaeum.

Until the fifties, it was **the** place to go to the movies. You saw two full-length films, preceded by Harry Jacobs and his Band with 30 minutes of singers, music, dancers, or other variety performers. There might be Stella Power (protégé of Melba), Alan Eddy (of the National Opera), Horrie Dargie (mouth organ), George Wallace (comedian), or Lee Gordon's rock stars. Mr Albert Wright was projectionist at the Palais for 43 years, until 1962.

In his memoir, *A Fine and Private Place*, Brian Matthews evokes the atmosphere of Friday night pictures at the Palais, (the Victory was closer, but scorned by the family for its 'inferior films'):

But the night the Palais went non-smoking was an even more resounding event. Going to the Palais Pictures on a Friday night was a matter of stately and unswerving ritual. To begin with; we had to be striding along Havelock Street with a good forty-five minutes up our sleeve. My father could not afford the back stalls so the aim was to get in to very back seat of the front stalls. This took speed, organisation, and a certain amount of steely determination and a capacity to tough it out when your better feelings were being appealed to by apparently feeble competitors either for a place in the queue or, once inside, one of the last three seats in the row.

Once ensconced, the old man would light up the first of his six going-to-the-pictures cigarettes. The next would be during the newsreel and 'shorts'; then one at interval, two

during the main feature and one walking home. On this fatal night he had to forgo the first because there were notices everywhere forbidding it and, when the lights dimmed in preparation for the Val Morgan advertisements, a notice on the screen spelt out the ban. When he saw this, my old man hissed boomed and stamped his feet, to the exquisite embarrassment of my mother and me. We then settled down for the next three hours or so in the close presence of people who had identified us beyond dispute as a family of loonies. Not that the old man cared what they thought.

But by 1960, television had reduced audiences to only a hundred. So that year the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust produced its first opera at the Palais. Yet despite these changes, in Melbourne only the Astor and the Regent (to a lesser extent), are as intact as the Palais.

The Hoyts Victory, corner of Barkly and Carlisle Streets was second only to the Palais in size when it was built in 1921 for the Francis W. Thring consortium. After alteration in 1928, it still seated 2,550. The purchase in 1971 by the National Theatre, managed by the remarkable John Cargher, saved it from the fate of death by television. In 1974, alterations for conversion to theatre use by the National were completed to the design of Raymond Milton Johnson (43).

Fifties international stars to appear on the Palais stage included Eartha Kitt, Frankie Lane, Bob Hope, Johnnie Ray, Louis Armstrong, Nelson Eddy (twice) and Abbott and Costello (the comedians). Also in the fifties, there were Michael Edgley's first Russian spectacles, including the Bolshoi Ballet, and every year the Boy Scouts' Gang Show.

Into the sixties came Harry Belafonte, more Eartha Kitt, Artur Rubenstein (pianist); Shelley Berman (comedian); Tom Jones and Yehudi Menuhin (violinist). In 1960 the new backstage facilities enabled the Elizabethan Theatre Trust's first opera season, with Joan Hammond, soprano in *Salome* and *Madam Butterfly*, and another season of opera in 1962. That year, there were the first musicals at the Palais, revivals from the 1920s: the *Desert Song*, *New Moon* and the *Student Prince*. The Royal Ballet appeared with Margot Fonteyn. In this decade, the Palais was seldom dark.

In the seventies, Edgley spectacles became more so: the Bolshoi again, the Kirov, 'Stars of World Ballet' and the Australian Ballet, regularly. There were more musicals, with two long seasons of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. At last in 1978, the Australian Opera appeared there, with a lavish *Nabucco* with Joan Sutherland. It was only at the Palais that audiences could be large enough to pay for such productions, and stars such as the Rolling Stones and Lou Reed. It was frequently the venue of the Melbourne International Film Festival.

In 1982, the Victorian Arts Centre theatres, supplanted the Palais for opera and ballet. Then in 1985 the Palais theatre hosted a memorable production of *La Cage aux Folles*. However, once the Princess Theatre (another Henry White interior, 1922) was restored, with a new fly tower in 1990, and later the Regent also (1994), most of the big musicals were attracted to the newer venues. The theatre is now used as a venue for international performers and rock groups.

Current proposals for the Palais under the St Kilda Foreshore Design Framework include improvement of the Palais stage, extensions of dressing rooms with additional facilities at the rear.



Palais Theatre, 2002

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