

Hawke's Bay Opera House, 103 Hastings Street South

Inventory Number 18; Property ID 100467; TRIM Reference 100467#002#0007

Report by Helen McCracken / Michael Kelly / Chris Cochran, 25 August 2007, Amended 4 July 2008; Final Audit 10 November 2009; Updated August 2012

Hastings CBD Heritage Inventory Project



HAWKE'S BAY OPERA HOUSE



Photo: K Pascall, 2012

LOCATION:

Street and Number: 103 Hastings Street East

City / Town: Hastings

Region: Hawke's Bay

LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

Legal Description: Part Lots 152, 153, 154 and 158 and Deeds Plan 83

Certificates of Title (including registry): HB 96/284, HB 52/53 and HN 52/543

SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Architectural Value:

The Hawke's Bay Opera House is a nationally important example of a major building in the Spanish Mission style. The auditorium is a fine period space, richly ornamented in contrasting styles of Art Nouveau and Art Deco. It is an original and somewhat idiosyncratic design, by an architect, Henry White, who built a significant reputation in Australasia for his ornate, functional and technically advanced theatres. The Opera House is an extremely important survivor of his early career, matched for its architectural quality by only a handful of theatres nationwide.

The building is prominent in the streetscape, especially because of the two towers; it combines with the Council Chambers alongside and the Wesley Church opposite to make a nodal point in the fabric of the city that stands out for its period and visual interest, and its civic and cultural amenity.

Cultural Value:

The Hawke's Bay Opera House is a building of great social and cultural significance to the people of Hastings and wider Hawke's Bay. Now showcased as an opera house, it has been the centre of major theatrical and musical performance in Hastings since its construction and together with its long history as a cinema makes it one of the most culturally important buildings in Hastings. The building's close historical and physical association with the immediately adjacent Municipal Chambers, together with the Wesley Methodist Church across the road, forms one of the most distinctive and best known streetscapes in Hastings.

Historic Value:

The Hawke's Bay Opera House is one of Hastings' premier historic buildings. Its initial construction was a remarkably bold statement by what was still at the time a small provincial centre. The building has had nearly a century of use, during which time thousands of theatrical and musical performances, movies, meetings, even boxing events have taken place. The building's fortunes have waxed and waned but it has always remained the premier performance venue in Hawke's Bay. The building's historical association with the Municipal Chambers next door is a particularly important one and the two buildings together demonstrate the active role the Hastings City Council has played in civic life.

Technological Value:

There is technological value in the structure of the building. White was an innovative designer, and the particular problems presented by a large auditorium saw him produce some ground-breaking designs, first seen in the St James' Theatre, Wellington (1912). The Opera House survived the Hawke's Bay earthquake, and was later strengthened, and thus provides interesting technical information on structural design in a highly earthquake-prone part of New Zealand. Because of the survival of much interior fabric, there is technical value in finishes such as those in plaster, tiles, timber and glass.

HISTORY:

The Municipal Theatre, Hastings, is one of the last remaining theatres in New Zealand built by Henry Eli White (1877-1952). It is also one of the earliest buildings designed in

New Zealand using the Spanish Mission style, and the lavish Art Nouveau interior is also important, being probably the largest and most complete example of its type in New Zealand.

Henry Eli White was born in Dunedin. His father initially employed him as a building contractor while Henry attended night school. Following a successful contract to design a huge tunnel from the Waipori River to the city of Dunedin, White received a number of design contracts. In 1900 he received his first contract to design a theatre for John Fuller and Sons in Christchurch. They were to commission White again in the construction of the Edwardian Baroque styled His Majesty's Theatre, now known as the St James, Wellington. When finished (1912), this was the largest theatre in Australasia and the first in New Zealand to make extensive use of steel framing in the structure. Of particular note was White's use of the cantilever principle, which allowed the weight of the dress circle and gallery to be transferred through joists to the main steelwork, reducing the number of columns that would hinder the audience's view of the stage. White's fame spread across the Tasman, where he was commissioned to design a number of theatres, including the State Theatre in Sydney (1929) which is now recognised as one of the finest picture theatres in the world. Throughout his career White was to design 130 theatres; one of the few remaining in New Zealand is the former Hastings Municipal Theatre.

During the 1900s the Hastings Borough Council began to give consideration to building a new town hall for council business and a venue for concerts. The Council's first town hall had hosted professional troupes since the 1880s. In 1891 the Town Hall Company was wound up and the Hastings Volunteers leased the hall; they renamed the hall the Princess Theatre. It was sold in the 1890s, and from the late 1890s it became a venue for moving pictures. By the early 1900s the theatre was considered a fire risk and too small for travelling troupes.

In 1911 the borough council acquired a site on the corner of Hastings Street South and Heretaunga Street North, adjacent to the Council buildings. Two sections of land were acquired, for £1400 and £1762-10.¹ In January 1914 a loan of £29,300 was raised to build both a Council Chambers and theatre.² Henry White was chosen by the Council to design the theatre. Not long before the tender notice was advertised a petition was raised to change the orientation of the theatre to Hastings Street. This was met with a counter petition in favour of leaving the building as it had originally been planned – facing Heretaunga Street. The former won out. The decision to build theatre with a capacity of 1100 in a town with only 7000 inhabitants represented a considerable vote of confidence in the town's future.

The lowest tender of Bull Brothers of Napier (£12,000) was accepted and the foundation stone was laid on 21 April 1915. White's design was for an exterior in the Spanish Mission style, a style of architecture that was to become popular in Hawke's Bay after the 1931 earthquake. Inside White chose an Art Nouveau style, with richly ornate plaster decoration, coloured lead light windows and a magnificent sunburst chandelier. It was a combination of styles that White would again use for the (now demolished) Midland Hotel, Wellington (1917). In the end, the theatre cost just under £16,000 and although the construction proceeded satisfactorily, the absence of White, who was by then domiciled in Sydney and came over infrequently, did not sit well with the Council.³ White had a site representative, a Mr Simpson, but this did not assuage the Council, which also criticised White for not favouring New Zealand firms in tenders for fittings.⁴

¹ Wright M. 2001, *Town and Country: The History of Hastings and District*, Hastings District Council p.327

² Ibid.

³ Di Stewart and Associates and Salmond Architects 1997, 'Hastings Municipal Theatre, A Conservation Plan (draft)', Hastings District Council p.5

⁴ Ibid.

The Hastings Municipal Theatre officially opened on 18 October 1915, despite not being quite finished. The first performance was given by the Hastings Operatic Society.⁵ Before the building was completed, the Hastings Borough Council had also agreed to lease the rights to show pictures to A. P. McCormack on nights when the theatre was not required for other purposes. Six months after the opening of the theatre the Council took over the running of the picture business, and this was later run in conjunction with the 'Cosy Picture Theatre'. The building was used for more than just theatrical and musical performances and movies. In a now celebrated event, Jerry Monahan fought Pat Gleeson in a boxing match in the theatre on 26 April 1922.⁶

The building survived the Hawke's Bay Earthquake in 1931. However, major reconstruction and modification was undertaken to strengthen the building. The local architectural firm of Davies Garnett and Phillips drew up the plans for the reconstruction and Fletcher Construction undertook the work. The stage and dressing rooms were rebuilt in reinforced concrete, and the auditorium strengthened. The tower roofs were removed and replaced with a different design.

During 1930s the Municipal Theatre continued to be used as a movie theatre under lease to J. C. Williamson Picture Corporation and Kemball Theatres, which also ran a number of other picture theatres leased from the Hastings Borough Council. In 1940 the 'Municipal' was leased to H. B. Amusements Ltd.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the theatre underwent considerable refurbishment. This included alterations to the front of house, kitchen and bar and the building of a walkway between the theatre and the former Municipal Chambers. In 1994, bathrooms and dressings rooms were upgraded and a sprinkler system and fire escape installed.⁷ The theatre was run in conjunction with the facilities in the adjoining building as the 'Hastings Municipal Theatre Complex', a multi-purpose venue comprising of theatre and function rooms.

In 2002, work began on more changes, with the installation of a bar, upgrading of the stage house and dressing rooms, access to adjacent Municipal Building was created on first floor level, and the hand line flying system replaced.⁸ In 2004 work began on restoring and upgrading the theatre proper with modernising of the backstage facilities and then the restoration and upgrading of the auditorium. The centrepiece of this was a new painted auditorium ceiling, designed by artists Roz Paterson and Tina Carter, who were part of a team of five painters that undertook the painting. This new work was intended to weave the stylistic strands of the building together in one artistic piece.⁹ In addition, a new plaza and foyer addition was constructed on a vacant site to the immediate east of the theatre.

The cost of all this work was met by the Council, central government and community fundraising. The work on the theatre was finished in early 2006 and the building was reopened by Prime Minister Helen Clark on 24 March 2006.

⁵ The production was *San Toy*. Pers comm. Sally Jackson to Imelda Bargas, 18 June 2008.

⁶ Di Stewart and Associates and Salmond Architects 1997, 'Hastings Municipal Theatre, A Conservation Plan (draft)', Hastings District Council p.6

⁷ ABA 940138, ABA 940240, ABA 941077, ABA 941623, ABA 941934, Hastings District Council

⁸ RC 20020302, RC 20030411, Hastings District Council

⁹ Shirley Howells, 'Hawke's Bay Opera House is reopening to a chorus of enthusiasm', in *Heritage New Zealand*, Autumn 2006 pp.14-17

In 2007, a retractable fabric roof supported by triangular steel trusses was constructed over the plaza area. The roof was constructed to maximise the potential use of the plaza by creating an all weather venue and to be an artistic feature of the plaza.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

Architect: Henry Eli White

Date of construction: 1915

Builder: Bull Brothers¹⁰

Construction details: Structural materials include brick masonry, reinforced concrete, steel and timber trusses; structural upgrading in reinforced concrete was carried out after the Hawke's Bay earthquake. Roofs are of clay tiles and corrugated iron. (No original documentation that would give specific structural information is currently available.)

Description: The Hawke's Bay Opera House is a major civic building in the Spanish Mission style. This is evidenced in the highly ornamented front elevation to Hastings Street South, which features wide overhanging eaves, tiled roofs, window hoods on brackets of several types, semi-circular openings below the verandah and in the towers, and two central balconies, embellished with balustrading and corbels; there are two windows that are no more than long thin slots, rising through two floors and capped with hoods held on curved brackets. Wall surfaces are otherwise plain plaster. It is a busy façade, with the openings of various shapes arranged symmetrically about the central entrance into the foyer and the balconies above. Two square towers are powerful defining elements – their scale and solidity give the building an impressive and substantial character.

The style does not carry through to the interior, where ornate plaster work in various Classically-inspired decorative motifs decorates the auditorium, along with the flowing lines of Art Nouveau and the jazzy geometric shapes of the central 'sunburst' light fitting.

The building is thus an intriguing stylistic mix. In a bold decision, the major upgrading of the facilities that was completed in 2006 saw a modern addition made to the south side of the building to provide a large foyer space and plaza; this has enhanced the usefulness of the Opera House, giving a generous space where the original foyer was somewhat cramped. A new figurative mural was painted on the dome of the auditorium ceiling, an obviously modern work but one respectful of the space that it dominates.

ELEMENTS OF ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE:

Element	Significance
Street elevation	Architectural aesthetic
Front (period) foyer	Architectural, aesthetic
Auditorium	Architectural, aesthetic, technical
Structure, including post-earthquake strengthening	Technical

¹⁰ Fowler, M 2007 *From Disaster to Recovery: the Hastings CBD 1931-35*, Michael Fowler Publishing Limited, Havelock North pp. 187-9.

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MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES:

Bob Ansell, 'Empires Lost, Profile on Henry Eli White, FNZIA-FIA', in *New Zealand Architect*, No.4, 1987

Di Stewart and Associates and Salmond Architects 1997, 'Hastings Municipal Theatre, A Conservation Plan (draft)', Hastings District Council

Mary Boyd, *City of the Plains, A History of Hastings*, Wellington, 1984

Matthew Wright 2001, *Town and Country: The History of Hastings and District*, Hastings District Council

Peter Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture: From Polynesian Beginnings to 1990*, Auckland, 1991

Shirley Howells, 'Hawke's Bay Opera House is reopening to a chorus of enthusiasm', in *Heritage New Zealand*, Autumn 2006

OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION:

NZHPT Register: Listed as a Category I historic place (Register No. 1096)

District Plan: Listed as a Category I heritage item in the Operative Hastings District Plan (Plan declared operative 10th June 2003), Reference No. H3.

New Zealand Historic Places Act 1993: This site has been identified as a potential archaeological site under Section 2 of the New Zealand Historic Places Act 1993.

OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS:

Photo of the Opera House prior to redevelopment



Photo: M. Kelly, 2004

ARCHIVE PLAN(S):

Hastings District Council does not hold plans for this building.