



HERITAGE
COUNCIL
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES

Interim Entry

1. **Data Base No.** 2404
2. **Name** *Cygnnet Theatre (formerly Como Theatre)* (1938)
3. **Description of elements included in this entry** Cygnnet Theatre and the land on which it stands, being Lots 1, 2 & 3 on D 5661, comprised in C/T 51/139a, C/T 51/140a and C/T 51/141a.
4. **Local Government Area** City of South Perth
5. **Location** 16 Preston St, Como
6. **Owner** Stiles, C.J., Crossing, N.M. & Anderson, C.J.
7. **Statement of Significance of Place (Assessment in Detail)**

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

The *Cygnnet Theatre* is a cinema situated in Preston Street, Como. Originally named the *Como Theatre*, it was built, in 1938, for James Stiles of the Grand Theatre Company. It was designed by the well-known, inter-war architect, William Leighton.¹

During the 1930s, South Perth and adjacent suburbs were residential areas surrounded by the Swan River, with stretches of river beaches. It was largely a family-orientated, 'respectable' area.² Como Beach was very much a family area, with its shallow waters suitable for young families. A ferry service to the city left from the Como Jetty, at the bottom end of Preston Street.

The 1930s was a boom period for entertainment. Throughout Australia a visit to the cinema was a very popular pastime, an inexpensive escape from the economic depression. The novelty of the sound revolution in cinema attracted many more film-goers and this increased popularity was reflected in the number of cinemas either built or altered to specifically accommodate 'talkies'.³

The expansion of cinema entertainment was not confined to the traditional city centres of Perth or Fremantle. Many cinemas were built in the suburbs. Suburban

¹ Geneve, V. 'William Thomas Leighton: Cinema Architect of the 1930s' in Bromfield, D. (ed.) *Essays on Art and Architecture in Western Australia* (Nedlands, U.W.A. Press, 1988) p. 19.

² Crowley, F.K. *Westralian Suburb: The History of South Perth*, (Perth, Rigby, 1962) p. 84.

³ *ibid.*, p. 89.

cinemas not only serviced local patrons, but brought patrons in from surrounding suburbs. The ferry service to Como Jetty ran between Perth, Coode Street, Como and Canning Bridge.⁴ The tram service ran from Canning Highway to Angelo Street, with an extension along Labouchere Road to Preston, Mary and Ednah Streets.⁵

The *Como Theatre* was not the first cinema in the South Perth area. In 1922, the *Swan Street Hall* screened pictures twice weekly.⁶ The *Gaiety Picture Theatre*, situated on the corner of Coode and Angelo Streets, was built for James Stiles and C.R. Clydesdale in 1926.⁷ The *Hurlingham Picture Theatre* on Canning Highway was an open-air theatre built, in 1933, also for James Stiles.⁸ Both the *Gaiety Picture Theatre* and *Hurlingham Picture Theatre* were in operation when the *Como Theatre* opened in 1938; however, the *Como Theatre* was the most modern and up-to-date cinema in the district. It superseded both the *Gaiety Picture Theatre* and *Hurlingham Picture Theatre* in size and was the first cinema in the area built to screen 'talkies'.

James Stiles was a cinema pioneer in Western Australia. Formerly a real estate agent, Stiles moved into the cinema industry to save one of his assets, the *Grand Theatre*, which faced ruin in the wake of the stock market crash in 1929. Although Stiles had also bought the *Gaiety Picture Theatre* some years earlier, he did not become actively involved in the running of his cinemas until after the crash. With the boom in cheap entertainment, the Grand Theatre Company soon became a very successful company. In 1938, Stiles managed to secure a ten year lease on the *Piccadilly Theatre*, modernised his existing cinemas and built the *Como Theatre*.⁹

The *Como Theatre* was officially opened on 4 March 1938, by the chairman of the South Perth Road Board, G.V. Abjornson.¹⁰ The ceremony appears to have been quite modest and without the fanfare of some other cinemas that opened at the same time.¹¹

The *Como Theatre* was designed by architect, William Leighton of Baxter Cox and Leighton, though later known for his work on the *Fremantle Port Authority Building* and *Passenger Terminal* in the 1960s, earned his reputation as a leading cinema designer for his work on the several Perth cinemas he designed in the 1930s. These included the *Piccadilly Theatre and Arcade*, *Windsor Theatre*, and *Astor Theatre*, as well as the refurbishment of the *Royal Theatre* and *Grand Theatre*.¹² Apart from the *Oriana* in Fremantle, the *Como Theatre* is thought to be the only cinema that Leighton designed for a site south of the river.

The emphasis of Leighton's cinema architecture of the 1930s was that of designing functional contemporary buildings, and his cinemas commonly featured streamlined symbols and motifs for decoration. Symbols of the twentieth century machine age

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁷ Gothard, J. *Across Perth Water: Reminiscences of South Perth* (South Perth City Council, 1988) p. 91.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 94.

⁹ Geneve, V. 'Versions of Modernism in Western Australian Cinema Design, 1930-1940' Master of Arts Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1991, vol. 3, p. 9.

¹⁰ *West Australian*, 4 March 1938, p. 2.

¹¹ For example, the *Piccadilly Theatre* opened in the same month as the *Cygnets Theatre* and was featured in newspapers and magazines. See detailed description of opening and features of the *Piccadilly* in 'Building and Construction' 11 February 1938, p. 3ff. and 11 March 1938, p. 4ff.

¹² Geneve, V. 'William Thomas Leighton' p. 18; *West Australian*, 14 March, 1990, p. 26 b.

such as cars, ships and trains were often used on cinemas to reflect contemporary technologies.¹³ The *Como Theatre* reflects the architectural style popular in the inter-war period, using nautical motifs such as wavy lines, smooth flat curves and tubular handrails, with an architectural emphasis on both the horizontal and the vertical aspects of the building.¹⁴ The plaster motifs used in the *Como Theatre* were modelled by Edward Kohler, who worked for the Perth Modelling Works.¹⁵

The *Como Theatre* originally had both an indoor Auditorium and an outdoor picture garden. The concept of combining an indoor and outdoor cinema served by the one 'bio box' was used in the *Windsor Theatre* in Nedlands, completed six months before the *Cygnets Theatre*.¹⁶

The *Como Theatre* was renamed the *Cygnets Theatre*, in the 1960s, to associate the cinema with the Festival of Perth, the logo of which is a swan.¹⁷ Despite the name change, the original Broadway face type lettering stating 'The Como Theatre' around the 'bio box' still exists. Although no longer a Festival of Perth venue, the *Cygnets Theatre* continues to successfully operate as a suburban cinema.

The place was classified by the National Trust of Australia (WA) in May 1988. The place was entered into the Register of the National Estate by the Australian Heritage Commission in November 1988. The place is entered into the City of South Perth Town Planning Scheme and is afforded protection under clause 88, schedule G of the scheme.

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The *Cygnets Theatre* is a two-storey cinema, originally with an adjacent outdoor picture garden. The *Cygnets Theatre* was built by W.H. Ralph and Sons of rendered load bearing brickwork, with a low-pitched corrugated asbestos roof, and timber floors.¹⁸ Designed by the same architect, the *Cygnets Theatre* is similar in plan, massing and form to the *Windsor Theatre* in Nedlands, which was completed six months earlier. Similarities include the streamlined contours of the form of the cinemas, the combination of indoor cinema and outdoor picture garden served by the one 'bio box', and contemporary decorative motifs.¹⁹

The *Cygnets Theatre* is sited in Preston Street in Como and overlooks the Swan River. The *Cygnets Theatre* is situated on an inclined road leading up to Labouchere Road from the river. The imposing tower, inscribed with the name *Como Theatre*, was clearly visible from the Como Jetty at the bottom of Preston Street.

The *Cygnets Theatre* is an example of the Inter-War Functionalist style. Characteristics of this style are the asymmetrical massing of smooth geometric elements, an emphasis on exterior form reflecting internal function and the juxtaposition of

13 Stephens, J., Budrikis, A. and Kho, L. 'Case Study: Cygnets Picture Theatre, Como' (Student report, Curtin University, c.1989) p. 16.

14 National Trust (W.A.) Building Information Form on Cygnets Theatre, 1988, p. 2.

15 Australian Heritage Commission, Assessment Form on Cygnets Theatre, n. d. .p. 4.

16 Geneve, V. 'William Thomas Leighton', p. 19.

17 National Trust (W.A.) Assessment Exposition, 1988, p. 2.

18 National Trust (W.A.) Building Information Form on Cygnets Theatre, 1988, p. 1; Stephens, J., *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

19 Geneve, V. 'William Thomas Leighton', p. 19.

horizontal and vertical aspects of the building.²⁰ In this instance the asymmetry is a result of the emphasis on the building's functional elements.²¹

The central tower, originally marking the main entrance at ground level, houses the 'bio box' on the upper level. The 'bio box' was designed to allow the projector to be rolled to a different position, thus allowing the same projector to be used for either the indoor or outdoor screens. This was unusual at the time, as outdoor picture gardens normally had their own projectors. The *Windsor Theatre* in Dalkeith, designed some months prior to the *Cygnnet Theatre*, has a similar feature. The bio box of the *Cygnnet Theatre*, extends out from the tower in a fashionable streamlined curve and features a cantilevered balcony with steel railings, resembling the form of a modern ocean liner. Film canisters were hauled up to the 'bio box' balcony from the street, giving the balcony a functional as well as an aesthetic purpose.²² The 'liner' theme is reinforced by the three 'port hole' windows on the exterior of the building. The stylistic influence of Le Corbusier, a functional Modernist architect, is evident in these forms and details.

A shop projects from the western side of the building, which creates a small entry court in front of the cinema.²³ The horizontal awning over the shop front is carried around the front of the cinema. The original entrance to the theatre was at the base of the tower, emphasised by a pair of large doors, flanked by brick piers and two planter boxes. In the Foyer were two ticket-boxes, both on the eastern side of the entrance. The Entrance to the Auditorium was defined by a few stairs leading up into the Auditorium, while the Entrance to the picture garden was through a set of four doors almost in line with, but slightly east of the Main Entrance.²⁴

The interior of the *Cygnnet Theatre* is relatively plain, in keeping with the functionalist style. The Auditorium, which includes a Dress Circle, can accommodate 712 patrons.²⁵ The nautical theme was continued inside the theatre illustrated by the wave pattern on the carpets and side walls of the Auditorium and the Foyer ceiling.²⁶ The existing carpets are not original, but the design replicates that of the original.²⁷

The *Cygnnet Theatre* had a Crying Room, which was situated next to the ticket-box for the picture garden. This was a room where mothers could attend to their children and still see the film. The room was at the back of the Auditorium and was screened off by a glass window. Mothers could see through the glass, but the children's noise was blocked by the glass so as not to disturb other cinema patrons.²⁸ The crying room was converted into the Manager's Office in 1969.

²⁰ Apperly, R., Irving, R. and Reynolds, P. *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, (North Ryde, Angus and Robertson, 1989) p. 185.

²¹ Geneve, V. 'Versions of Modernism', vol. 1, p. 120.

²² Apperly, R., *et. al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

²³ Geneve, V. 'Versions of Modernism', vol. 1, p. 120.

²⁴ Stephens, J., *et. al.*, Appendix D: Original Plans of the Theatre.

²⁵ Bell, M.D. *Perth: A Cinema History* (Sussex, Book Guild, 1986) p. 23.

²⁶ Geneve, V. 'Early Twentieth Century Preservation in America: Comparisons with Western Australia' in *The Architect*, vol. 28, no. 1, Autumn 1988, p. 32; National Trust (W.A.) Assessment Exposition, 1988, p. 1. The 'wave' motif represented a 'wave of optimism'.

²⁷ National Trust (W.A.) Assessment Exposition, 1988, p. 2.

²⁸ Stephens, J., p. 45.

The upstairs lounge area was at the top of a jarrah-lined stairwell.²⁹ The Lounge was curved to conform with the shape of the 'bio box' above. The use of banded plaster coving and indirect lighting was a feature of the foyer and the lounge. The fittings are consistent with the use of other contemporary decorative materials, including fluorescent lighting, throughout the building.³⁰ Acoustic tiles line the balcony and can also be found on the back wall of the stalls, with the exception of a small break in the section where the crying room was.³¹

The Entrance and Foyer of the cinema was rearranged in 1964; the entry doors were shifted west of the original entrance, and the original entrance area converted into part of the sweets counter. The ticket-box for the picture garden now served both indoor and outdoor theatres and the area of the old ticket-box for the Auditorium was also used for the new sweets counter.³² The profit margin on confectionary was starting to outstrip the profit on cinema ticket sales.

Air conditioning was installed in the cinema in October 1968 to combat the threat of television, but patronage continued to drop and the picture garden was demolished within a year.³³ Although the picture garden no longer exists, the stairs down from the 'bio box' serve as a reminder of the original layout of the *Cygnets Theatre*.³⁴

In 1981 alterations were made to the auditorium. Seats in the front stalls were removed and the other seating was realigned. The theatre is currently leased by Hoyts from the owner, Colin Stiles, a great nephew of the original owner, James Stiles.³⁵

ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in September, 1991 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

1. AESTHETIC VALUE

The *Cygnets Theatre* is a fine example of the Inter-War Functionalist style of building. It demonstrates all the characteristic features of the style; asymmetric massing of smooth geometric forms, juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical elements, inscribed signage on the building, and ocean liner inspired detailing. (Criterion 1.1)

The *Cygnets Theatre* demonstrates the new functional approach to cinema design in Perth in the late 1930s. The combination of the projection facilities for both the indoor Auditorium and outdoor picture garden was an innovative concept in cinema design. The *Cygnets Theatre*, was one of the first cinemas in Perth to include this concept. (Criterion 1.2)

29 Geneve, V. 'Versions of Modernism', vol. 1, p. 123.

30 Stephens, J., p. 49.

31 Geneve, V. 'Versions of Modernism', vol. 1, p. 123.

32 Stephens, J., p. 31.

33 National Trust (W.A.) Assessment Exposition, 1988, p. 1.

34 *ibid.*, p. 2.

35 Stephens, J., p. 32.

The tower of the *Cygnets Theatre* stands out in the surrounding landscape, and is a familiar landmark in the Como area. (Criterion 1.3)

2. HISTORIC VALUE

The *Cygnets Theatre* is an example of the many cinemas built in Perth and the suburbs in the Inter-War period, reflecting the popularity of cinema entertainment in the 1930s. This enormous popularity waned in the 1960s following the introduction of television. (Criterion 2.1)

The tram line along Labouchere Road and the Como Jetty at the end of Preston Street have long since disappeared, however the *Cygnets Theatre* remains a focal point and reminder in the Preston Street commercial precinct, in the Como area. (Criterion 2.1)

The *Cygnets Theatre* (originally known as the *Como Theatre*) was the first purpose built sound cinema in the suburbs immediately south of the city. Its opening meant that local residents no longer had to travel outside of Como to see a 'talkie', while the ferry and tram services brought people from other suburbs to the theatre. (Criterion 2.1)

The *Cygnets Theatre* is closely associated with cinema pioneer James Stiles. Stiles, and his Grand Theatre Company, were very influential in the growth of cinema entertainment in Western Australia. (Criterion 2.3)

The *Cygnets Theatre* is the least altered of the extant cinemas in Perth designed by William Leighton. Leighton's contribution to cinema design in the 1930s was revolutionary and the *Cygnets Theatre* is illustrative of the many cinemas he designed in Western Australia. (Criterion 2.4)

3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

4. SOCIAL VALUE

Because of its long and continuous association with cinema entertainment the *Cygnets Theatre* is valued by the community. It has been a place of entertainment at which thousands of Western Australians have viewed films. (Criterion 4.1)

5. RARITY

While there are a few other suburban cinemas of the same period still operating in Perth, the *Cygnets Theatre* has a rarity value because, apart from the loss of its picture garden, it has had minimal alterations to its original fabric. The use of a single bio box to project to either the cinema or the adjacent picture garden is a feature shared by the *Windsor Theatre* and the *Beacon Cinema*. The advent of television in the 1960s and recent trend of building cinema complexes have challenged the financial survival of suburban cinemas such as the *Cygnets Theatre*. (Criterion 5.2)

6. REPRESENTATIVENESS

The *Cygnnet Theatre* demonstrates the principal characteristics of Inter-war Functionalist architecture by its emphasis of the horizontal and vertical aspects of the building. (Criterion 6.2)

The *Cygnnet Theatre* is representative of the enormous popularity of cinema entertainment in inter-war society in Australia, an activity which has become less central to life as other forms of entertainment have gained popularity. The *Cygnnet Theatre* is representative of the many suburban cinemas built between the wars. (Criterion 6.2)

The *Cygnnet Theatre* is representative of the architectural design of William Leighton, in the 1930s. (Criterion 6.2)

CONDITION

Continuous use and routine maintenance over the years has kept the *Cygnnet Theatre* in sound condition.

INTEGRITY

The *Cygnnet Theatre* continues to be used as a cinema and retains a high degree of integrity.

AUTHENTICITY

Changes have been made in projection and sound technologies, the outdoor picture garden has long since gone, air conditioning has been introduced and the Foyer has been subject to some alterations. However, generally the fabric and original finishes and details of the *Cygnnet Theatre* have been retained. The place retains a high degree of authenticity.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Cygnnet Theatre has cultural heritage significance for the following:

the place demonstrates the new functional approach to cinema design in Perth in the late 1930s. The combination of one projection unit for both indoor auditorium and outdoor picture garden was a innovation of the period;

the place is a fine example of an Inter-War Functionalist architecture, demonstrating all the characteristic features of the style;

apart from being the first purpose built sound cinema in the suburbs immediately south of the city, the *Cygnnet Theatre* has a rarity value as the least altered of the 1930s suburban cinemas of Perth still in operation;

the cinema is closely associated with Western Australian cinema pioneer James Stiles, and cinema architect William Leighton;

its siting and distinctive form has established the *Cygnets Theatre* as a Como landmark; and,

the place is valued and continues to be used by the community as a place of cinema entertainment.

8. Register of Heritage Places

Interim Entry 19/08/1994

9. Conservation Order

10. Heritage Agreement

11. References

Australian Heritage Commission, Assessment Form, c.1988.

National Trust (W.A.), Assessment Exposition, 1988.

National Trust (W.A.), Building Information Form on Cygnets Theatre, 1988.

Stephens, J., Budrikis, A. and Kho, L. 'Case Study: Cygnets Picture Theatre, Como' (Student Report, Curtin University, c.1989)