

The Regent Theatre

A CAMPAIGN REVISITED

Recent publicity surrounding a proposal to redevelop the Regent Theatre site has brought to mind the National Trust of Queensland's campaign to save the Regent from demolition in the 1970s.

The Regent campaign (ultimately lost) sought to conserve the whole of the magnificent interior of the theatre described by the Trust as:

"...the epitome of the "old style", an exuberant mixture of Spanish perpendicular-Gothic and Rococo, typical of the aspirations of the grandeur and luxury of the developing talking-picture industry in the nineteen twenties." (National Trust of Queensland, *Objection to the application for redevelopment of the Regent Theatre, 1975*)

The Regent Theatre opened as a combined live theatre and cinema in 1929. Its opulent auditorium was capable of seating more than 2,500 people. It included a large oval dome above the stalls, embellished with plasterwork and featuring a one ton bronze chandelier. Over time the building came to be used exclusively as a film cinema. By the early 1970s the impact of television and changing lifestyles on cinema attendance led the operators, Hoyts Theatres, to propose conversion of the complex to a series of smaller cinemas. This conversion would involve destruction of the lavish interior of the auditorium. The first proposal for this, in 1973, opposed by the National Trust, did not proceed as the owner of part of the complex (the Mayne Estate Trust on behalf of the University of Queensland Medical School) was not satisfied with the proposed financial returns. By 1975, however, the concept was again under consideration, with the joint property owners (Hoyts and the Mayne Estate Trustees) lodging a development application with the Brisbane City Council.

The National Trust had placed the Regent Theatre on its Heritage Register in 1974, citing the whole theatre as "worthy of preservation at all costs...The Regent is one of the best surviving examples of the lavish picture palaces left in Australia" (quoted in paper by David Hunter, June 1979, for *Architecture Australia*). In August 1975, the Trust lodged an

objection to the conversion proposal,

"based on the fact that the building was classified as an essential component of the nation's heritage, that the conversion would destroy the soon to be unique interior, and that alternatives to the conversion had not been adequately canvassed or considered" (National Trust of Queensland *Newsletter*, February, 1976).

The initial application was refused by the City Council on technical grounds. A conference between the Trust, the applicants and the Council agreed that the Trust should be given time to formulate alternative plans for consideration.



The Trust commissioned an architectural firm to report on the feasibility of retention of the whole of the interior, and also of an alternative to this, based on saving the major part of the auditorium interior by extending the dress circle to stage level, with the stalls areas being converted to small cinemas. The Trust also employed a firm of quantity surveyors to provide an analysis of the commercial feasibility of these alternatives. Despite positive findings the applicants rejected the Trust's alternatives as 'impracticable'. The application was re-submitted in December 1975, and again the Trust lodged an objection.

By early 1976, the issue was receiving prominent coverage in the Brisbane newspapers. In his regular column "A Christian

Point of View" in the *Courier Mail*, the Anglican Dean of Brisbane, Dean George, wrote:

"Nobody could complain that the National Trust is just an organisation trying to place obstacles in the way of progress. It has gone to great trouble to present proposals to remodel Brisbane's Regent Theatre, retaining its unique character and providing a more viable financial proposition for the redevelopers. It has had expert advice. However the developers have rejected the proposition, and questions must be asked now of the developers whether they have a responsible alternative.

The Regent Theatre is an extraordinary building by any standard. Few buildings of its period and character survive in the world and this is Brisbane's only one. It must be possible

to remodel the building for more contemporary use while retaining the character of the interiors for future planning. The heat is now on the developers". (*Courier Mail*, 26 January, 1976)

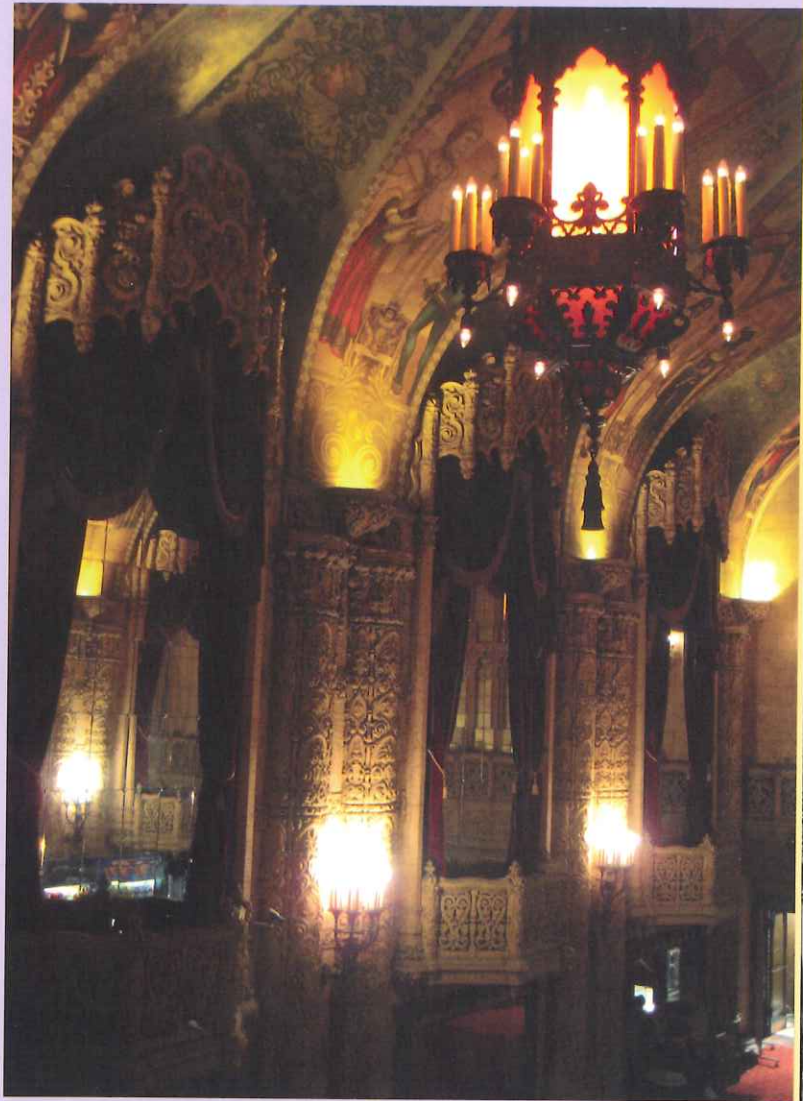
The Trust continued its campaign to save the building through 1976, with a presentation to a Special Committee of the Council's Planning Policy Advisory Committee being made in April. However, in June the Brisbane City Council's Registration Board ruled in favour of the redevelopment application. An appeal was then lodged by the Trust to the Local Government Court. By now, the Building Trades Group of Unions had also entered the fray, placing a 'green ban' on demolition work on the site.

In September, on the advice of its counsel, the Trust withdrew its appeal to the Court as its advice indicated that "the architectural historic significance of the building, or public interest in retaining such buildings, were not planning matters which could be entertained by the court" (quoted in *Telegraph*, 5 October 1976). The Building Trades unions then also lifted their green ban on the site. A request from the Trust to the State Government that it consider acquiring the theatre as a live theatre or cultural centre was declined.

The Trust President declared the failure to conserve the interior of the theatre to be a tragic commentary on Queensland's lack of legislation to protect vital parts of the nation's heritage. With the recently announced Heritage Act in New South Wales, he stated "Queensland now is the only state in Australia which has no legislation to protect the nation's heritage" (*Telegraph*, 5 October, 1976)

In February 1977, Hoyts announced plans to spend \$4million converting the Regent to a complex containing four cinemas. Only the original foyer would be retained. The Trust President stated that there was nothing more the Trust could do to preserve the theatre in its original state. "All that would be left would be for us to lie down in front of the bulldozers..." (*Sunday Mail*, 20 February 1977). The Trust agreed to prepare a detailed photographic record of the interior, and to save those items from the interior which could be saved.

By mid 1978, no work had yet commenced on the site. An application to the Australian Heritage Commission was



lodge by the National Trust of Queensland to have the Regent Theatre placed on the National Heritage Register (this application was ultimately successful). In July, a community group, supported by the Trust, began a "Save the Regent Campaign", collecting 30,000 signatures on a petition, and engaging the support of significant theatre personalities such as Sir Robert Helpmann, Dame Margot Fonteyn, Warren Mitchell, Diane Cilento and Michael Edgley.

In the face of this high profile campaign, the Regent Theatre finally closed for conversion on 27 August 1978. The Building Trades Group of Unions re-imposed the green ban on demolition. Despite the Trust's continued lobbying of the University of Queensland Senate and the State Government, no viable alternative plans for the building were identified, and the building unions decided on 8 December to remove their ban. Early on the morning of Saturday, 9 December, demolition of the interior of the building commenced.

After lengthy delays in the conversion process, the redeveloped Hoyts Regent Entertainment Centre eventually officially opened on 1 August 1980. Despite continuing public protest over demolition of this, and other iconic landmarks, such as the Bellevue Hotel and Cloudland Ballroom, no cultural heritage protection legislation was formulated in Queensland until the late 1980s. Eventually, this legislation culminated in the introduction of the *Queensland Heritage Act of 1992*.

