Heritage Impact Statement

Capitol House, 109-117 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Vic 3000, VHR471

The Capitol Theatre Reactivation
(Internal alterations to auditorium’s entry & foyers and installation of a passenger lift)

Figure 1. Capitol House, Photograph, April 2017

Michael Taylor Architecture and Heritage
Level 6, 443 Little Collins Street Melbourne Vic 3000
1. **Heritage Impact Statement for:**
   Capitol House, 109-117 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Vic 3000, VHR471

2. **Prepared for:**
   This report has been prepared for RMIT University.

3. **Prepared by:**
   Michael Taylor Architecture and Heritage.
   Level 6, 443 Little Collins Street, Melbourne, Vic 3000.

4. **Date:** 9 June 2017

5. **The Statement forms part of an application for:**

   Capitol Theatre Reactivation project including works to the auditorium’s entry and foyers, replacement of auditorium seating and carpet, installation of a new passenger lift, installation of LED lighting to the auditorium ceiling.

6. **Heritage Listings:**
   **Victorian Heritage Register/Heritage Act 1995**

   Capitol House, 109-117 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Vic 3000, VHR471.

   **Extent of Registration**

   AMENDMENT OF REGISTER OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS Historic Building No. 471.
   Capitol House, 109-117 Swanston Street, Melbourne.

   The whole of the building and land shown hatched on the attached plan marked (sic) “A” as described in Certificates of Title Volume 4678 Folio 493 and Volume 4678 Folio 433.


---

Figure 2. VHR Extent of Registration
City of Melbourne- Heritage Overlay

The site has an individual Heritage Overlay, HO747, under the City of Melbourne Planning Scheme.

7. Background to proposed works

Capitol House’s auditorium a.k.a. the Capitol Theatre was purchased by RMIT University in 1998, at that time a major package of works was carried out to provide universal access from ground floor to first level, improve amenities and to make the auditorium compliant to the then-current Building Codes and Standards. The auditorium was used as a lecture theatre by RMIT Business Faculty up until 2010 whilst a new faculty building was constructed near the main campus. The auditorium has been irregularly used by RMIT for the last number of years.

RMIT now proposed the Capitol Theatre Reactivation will bring RMIT’s film students, academics and the film industry and the public together in the historic building. The theatre’s heritage, location and architecture will be leveraged to turn it into a place to learn, create and innovate.

The reactivation project goal is to retain, restore and showcase the significant heritage fabric of the Capitol Theatre, and this objective is supported by a strategy for reactivating the building use and as a pre-eminent venue for the teaching, learning, research and culture of screen based media in Australia.

The cinema has been in RMIT ownership since 1998, and following a safety and audio-visual upgrade in 1999 has been used as a lecture theatre for the period 2000 to 2010.

RMIT recognizes the requirement need to improve overall accessibility for people of all abilities with the installation of a new passenger lift to serve currently inaccessible levels. The works will provide accessible paths of travel and facilities for people who use wheelchairs, for people with ambulatory disabilities and for people with sensory disabilities. These additions will improve the building’s compliance with The Disability Discrimination Act, The National Construction Code and The Australian Standard Design for Access and Mobility (AS 1428.1-2009).

The proposed internal works will focus on refurbishing the existing entry and level 1 foyer. Refurbishment and conservation works will enable ease of access and prepare the rooms for conferences, meetings and functions organized by RMIT and users.

8. Why is the place of heritage significance?

The Victorian Heritage Register’s Statement of Significance records the place’s architectural, historical, aesthetic and scientific (technical) significance:

Why is it significant?

Capitol House, Melbourne is of architectural significance as a unique expression and highly advanced design concept by the creative and well known architects, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony. It is of significance as one of their greatest works and as their largest
commercial building project. Capitol House, Melbourne is of architectural significance for its highly original combination of offices, shops and an entertainment venue in one building. Although not unique, it was an advanced concept at the time, developed on a major scale with the inclusion of a vast auditorium.

Capitol House, Melbourne is of historical significance as the first of three great picture palaces built in Melbourne in the 1920s. Preceding the Regent Theatre (VHR H0690) and the Forum Theatre (former State Theatre VHR H0438) by five years, it exposed Melburnians to a totally new phenomenon that was to become a fundamental part of popular culture.

Capitol House, Melbourne is of historical significance as the focus of one of Melbourne's first conservation campaigns. This included support from the National Trust, the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and architectural writer, Robin Boyd.

Capitol House, Melbourne is of aesthetic significance for its foyers and auditorium interiors, which are extraordinary and were highly advanced in concept in the 1920s. The auditorium ceiling design, with its spectacular lighting effects, is of particular importance.

Capitol House, Melbourne is of scientific (technical) significance for its highly innovative structural design which explored the limits of steel and concrete.¹

9. Current use of the places
The auditorium is currently unused. It was used daily throughout the academic year as a lecture theatre for RMIT Business School between 2000 and 2010. The auditorium was last used in 2014 for MIFF.

10. Existing Condition of the place
The entry and auditorium are located within the Capitol House complex, the auditorium being plugged in to the side of the frontispiece commercial tenancy building. The original Theatre was composed in an intricate and complex series of spaces of entries, staircases and foyers, including voids between levels. Much of this spatial intricacy was lost when the Capitol arcade was inserted through the ground floor and stalls levels. This intrusion introduced a layer of 1960s development which comprises much of the entry, level 1 and foyer that is subject on this application. Some rooms within the foyer original theatre have a good degree of spatial integrity but have been stripped of finishes and furnishings. The auditorium ceiling remains intact, being restored in 2005. The level 2 foyer is reasonably intact, the ceiling is visible from the current 1960s level 1 foyer floor.

11. Scope of proposed works
The reactivation is led by RMIT and the School of Media and Communications, and aims to:

- Upgrade infrastructure to meet current teaching, learning and cultural needs;

¹ Victorian Heritage Database on line.
- Installation of a passenger lift between levels 1 and 4 providing universal access throughout the building
- Refurbishment of level 1 foyer and staircase from Capitol Arcade;
- Activate and restore the currently disused levels 2 and 3 foyers for teaching and learning use;
- Installation of mechanical services/air conditioning to level 2 foyer;
- Restoration of missing details to the level 2 ceiling;
- Refurbish the level 4 former trophy shop for use as an office space;
- Review and upgrade projection to the existing theatre;
- New presentation of entry of level 1 from Capitol Arcade;
- Enable shared use between RMIT learning and teaching and Industry partners;
- Upgrade of the auditorium for use as a cinema with new seating and carpet, minor alteration works to the stage, and technical upgrades of lecture podium and projection for teaching and learning purposes.
- Installation of LED lighting to the auditorium ceiling.

The works are shown in the DD series drawing dated March 2017 prepared by Six Degrees Architects. This set includes architect’s statement, materials and finishes selections, perspective sketches and drawings.

12. What physical and visual affects will result from the proposed works?

Entry stairs and level 1 foyer.

Demolition works proposed in these areas will remove 1960s and later fabric, fittings and finishes. And represent the stairs and foyer with new décor and improved visibility between the arcade, staircase and foyer. The currently closed-in arrangement will be replaced with clear glazing. Architectural items from the 1960s-plus alterations such as auditorium entry cinema doors will be replaced with less lumpy doors which will create more floor space within this area. The candy bar shall be removed to allow further floor space. A section of ceiling on the south side will be removed for the proposed lift shaft. These works will affect mostly non original fabric and will appear more open, with a refreshed décor and with improved visibility to the arcade.

Figure 3, Capitol Theatre, existing entry & stairs April 2017
Figure 4, Capitol Theatre, existing level 1 foyer April 2017

The level 1 foyer is currently drab with no outside visibility, the space is accreted by infill, walls, large mirrors and dark carpets. This area will be opened up and given new décor. The décor is developed to compliment the palette of materials found in the original building (refer application set and architect’s statement).

Level 2 foyer

The original floor slab and ceiling to be cut for the proposed lift shaft, later internal additions of bench, wall and door (rear of fireplace) to be removed. The new lightweight lift shaft is to be installed along with new bulkheads and ducts for air diffusers; reinstatement of banquette seating to the perimeter of the balustrade, a glazed balustrade to the void.

Some later infill in the north-east corner to be removed, floor and ceiling cut to allow lift shaft. New additions will be the lift shaft in the north-west corner and new steel framed glazed balustrades to the perimeter of the void. The room’s appearance will have the added lift shaft and balustrade. The lift is positioned to retain the original ceiling glazing, the lift shaft will excise a section of the ceiling perimeter plaster bulkhead in the ceiling’s north-west corner.
Restoration works to the level 2 ceiling shall include reinstatement of the glazed and lamped row of ceiling that had been removed; and reconstruction of the concrete indent and dentils to south east corner section of ceiling.

A bar shall be installed on the foyer’s south side. It is proposed to treat this item architecturally as a low-level piece of furniture within the room, rather than it being a retail kiosk installation.

Decorative schemes of original carpet, paint shall be replicated so the space is restored more closely to its early appearance. The banquette seating to be upholstered in a durable leather finish (refer finishes board).

Figure 5, Capitol Theatre, existing level 2 foyer April 2017

Figure 6, Capitol Theatre, proposed level 2 foyer April 2017
Level 4- former trophy shop
This area is part of the 1960’s auditorium infill and will house the top of the lift shaft. The room will be cleared out and renovated for office use.

Auditorium
Visible changes will be replacement of non original carpet and seating. The carpets and seating were renewed in two stages during the 1998 to 2005 period. The current seating is lecture theatre style with fold down writing tablets and durable, vandal-proof shell backs. Cinema style seating is required for the new use.

It is proposed to install new Red/Blue/Green/White LED strip lighting in the auditorium ceiling lighting troughs. The programmable lighting will be able to emulate the original multi-coloured lighting scheme.

![Figure 7, Capitol Theatre, existing auditorium seating April 2017](image)

External services
The project includes removal of later roof top plant and mechanical services ducts.

13. What will be the effect on the significance of the place? And how are adverse effects mitigated?

Architectural and Aesthetic Significance
Capitol House’s architectural significance as an example of innovative design important architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony will be retained and preserved in that;
The original combination of combination of offices (now residential), shops and an entertainment venue is retained. The building’s distinct Chicago School external massing, form and detailing will not be affected by the current proposal which internal works only.

The remnant original foyers on levels 2 & 3 will be retained intact with the lift shaft addition in a discrete corner. The Level 3 glazed ceiling will be retained, save a small section of plaster perimeter bulkhead. New lifts in historic buildings usually seem to only work well in maybe one or two locations. The original proposal to run lift from ground to level 4 was disregarded following consultation with Heritage Victoria in 2016 as a lift serving all levels would be run through the glass ceiling. The proposed lift is located in a sideline location on levels 1 to 4 and it’s installation won’t entail destruction of irreplaceable fabric. The stepped glazed ceiling will be retained entirely. Considerable work has been undertaken to position this new lift shaft clear of the glazed ceiling, DDA concessions have been negotiated regarding the size and shape of this lift. It is currently in the minimal foot print, irreversible and the plaster bulkhead could be readily reconstructed when and if the lift is removed in the future.

The new lift will improve the building’s compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act, the National Construction Code and the Australian Standard Design for Access and Mobility (AS 1428.1- 2009).

The other most noticeable addition will be the balustrade extensions. These are composed of black painted steel frames and glazed in fill. These will be a noticeable but unobtrusive addition within these foyers. The additions are essential to obtain compliance with NCC, and to provide improved care and safety to building users.

The highly regarded auditorium ceiling, the most intact part of the building’s interior and within the auditorium, will be retained intact and re-lamped with a contemporary and energy efficient LED lighting system which will be able to emulate the original multi-coloured lighting scheme which illuminated the intricate, crystalline ceiling. The original Edison screw lighting system arranged on timber battens can be retained in situ as part of the building’s technological heritage.

**Historical significance**
Capitol House will remain as the first of the three picture palaces built in Melbourne in the 1920s, all three are included on VHR. The proposed works and program by RMIT are a compatible use as defined by the Burra Charter will continue cinematic use and education by RMIT’s film school and public.

**Scientific (technical) significance**
Capitol House will also be retained as a physical document of the John Monash designed reinforced concrete. The cutting of original concrete floors for the lift shaft on levels 2 and 3 will provide an opportunity to allow cross sectional inspection of original reinforced concrete and provide samples of the original materials.
14. Conclusions

**Auditorium use and public accessibility**
The proposed refurbishment of the 1960s entry and level 1 foyer; and installation of a passenger lift serving levels 1 to 4 is an unobtrusive and timely upgrade which will facilitate the Capitol Theatre’s use as an auditorium.

**Physical effects on original and later building fabric**
The works are mostly altering later building fabric and décor. The proposed new lift shaft and lift between levels 1 to 4 is unobtrusively positioned in these original rooms and has been formed to minimise attrition to original fabric and features.

**Heritage significance**
The works will have few adverse effects on the place’s stated architectural, aesthetic, historic and scientific significance. The adverse effects are mitigated by the compatible use, low visual effect on the place; and improved accessibility.