

Athenaeum, 28-36 Ocean Beach Road Sorrento (VHR H2227)

Q&As

What is the Athenaeum Sorrento?

The Athenaeum was included in the Victorian Heritage Register in 2011. The Athenaeum was constructed in the commercial centre of the Sorrento township in 1894 as a multi-purpose venue. Originally the Athenaeum was built with a flat-floored auditorium and two shops at ground level, with shopkeeper's residence at the first floor. In 1918 a bio-box was installed for silent movie projection, and alterations were made in the 1920s, 30s and 50s which saw the entrance, foyer and shopfronts rebuilt, and the flat floor to the auditorium replaced with a sloping floor. Extensive refurbishments were undertaken in 1995/96. Today the building comprises a foyer with theatre to the rear at ground level, and former shopkeeper's residence at the first floor.

The Athenaeum is of architectural and historical significance to the State of Victoria as an early example of a theatre in regional Victoria. It is important for its largely intact original ornate interior and its Moderne remodelling which reflects its new use as a cinema venue in the 1930s.

Its associations with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century development of Sorrento, one of Victoria's premier seaside resorts, are important. The building's multi-purpose, entertainment function reflects the early, and continuing, holiday character of Sorrento.

What has happened?

On 21 December 2022, Heritage Victoria received a permit application for works to facilitate the adaptive re-use of the Athenaeum, from cinema to retail premises. The proposal comprised alterations to the interior including demolition of some internal walls, the projection room, and stairs to the first-floor residence, installation of a suspended ceiling to the foyer and modification of the ground floor shopfronts. Interpretation works, retention and protection of the proscenium and exterior conservation works were also proposed.

Through negotiation, the conservation works were expanded to include removal of the paint from the limestone façade. The shopfront design was also revised to include solid sections below the windows rather than floor to ceiling glazing, retention of the Moderne highlight windows and retention and relocation of the 1930s Moderne doors to the display windows.

In relation to the proposed change of use, only works or activities at a registered place can be considered under the *Heritage Act 2017*, not the use of the place. The assessment of the proposed change of use was limited to how it might impact the cultural heritage significance of the place.

On 3 July 2023, the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria determined to issue a permit with conditions under s102 of the Act. The permit conditions require retention of the original stairs to the first-floor residence, as well as conservation and interpretation works.

What happens next?

The permit applicant, owner or a person with a real and substantial interest in the place may request a review of the Executive Director's determination to issue the permit, or any conditions of the permit. A request for a review must be made to the Heritage Council of Victoria within 60 days of the refusal of the application.