

Queen's Picture Theatre (Former)

181 Cuba Street



WCC (2011)

Summary of heritage significance

- 181 Cuba Street is a pleasant, if much altered, example of an Art Deco cinema with some Art Nouveau influences. The first floor street façade is a lively and well-articulated composition that benefits from a well-conceived colour scheme.
- This building was constructed as one of Wellington's first movie-theatres and played an important social and historical role in early Wellington. It is associated with the Queen's Theatre Co, and with James Bennie the architect who designed it.
- The building contributes to the Cuba Street Heritage Area

District Plan:	Map 16, reference 86/3
Legal Description:	Pt Sec 153 Town of Wellington
Heritage Area:	Cuba Street Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	Category II, reference 5341
Archaeological Site:	NZAA Central City Archaeological Area R27/270
Other Names:	
Key physical dates:	Built: 1916
Architect / Builder:	Architect: James Bennie
Former uses:	Commercial – Theatre
Current uses:	Commercial – Retail
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not Earthquake Prone – SR 188107

Extent: Cityview GIS



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The unassuming and much-altered building at 181 Cuba Street was once one of Wellington's finest picture theatres, and was built at a time when the cinema was the main form of mass-entertainment in New Zealand.

181 Cuba Street was designed in 1915 by James Bennie for the Queen's Theatre Co. and opened in 1916 as the Queen's Picture Theatre. The theatre shared the building's frontage with a pharmacy. It was reported at the time that 'no expense has been spared in making this theatre one of the most elaborate and up to date in the Dominion. Special arrangements have been made for a continuous supply of the best of pictures'.¹

Following the closure of the cinema in 1955, the building was adapted for use as a billiard saloon, and later as a grocer's, a wholesale furniture outlet, and a musical instrument shop. By the 1980s the building had found a sustained use as a restaurant and café with offices above. The retail space/café is currently vacant.²

The exterior façade of the building has been altered several times since the time of construction. Bennie's original design was an exuberant and decorative expression of the Art Nouveau style with ornate features such as foliated columns and a decorative acroterion at parapet level. The façade was remodelled and these ornamental features removed, possibly in the late 1930s but this date does not appear in the building records.³ The shop-front and interior of the building have been extensively altered since the time of construction and retain little of their original integrity.

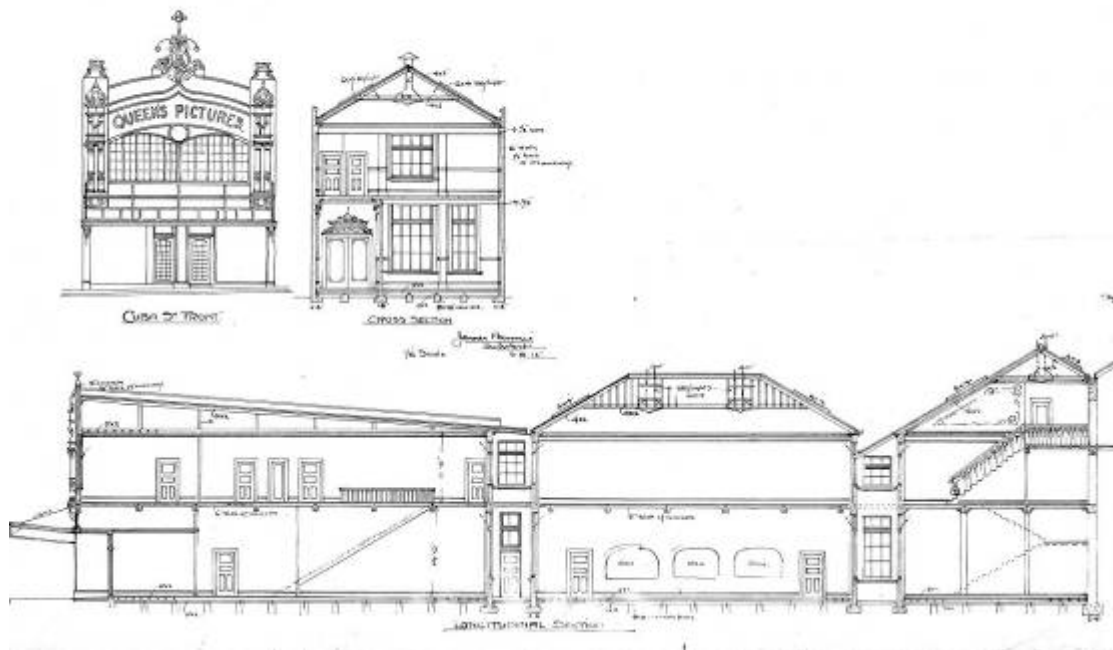
This building is a simple and attractive element of the streetscape which contributes well to the urban fabric of Cuba Street. The building is a good representative of Bennie's work and the period of its construction. It retains economic and functional use values and has some authenticity of materials, design, craftsmanship, and setting.

¹ 'Queen's Picture Theatre', Evening Post, 20 November 1916, Page 3, accessed 1 November 2013, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=EP19161120.2.24.10&srpos=9e=-----10--1---0Queens+theatre+wellington-->

² Michael Kelly and Russell Murray, *Cuba Street Heritage Area Report* (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006), 20.

³ Wellington City Council, '181 Cuba Street – Commercial Building', *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 1995*, (Wellington City Council 1995).

1.2 Timeline of modifications (original plans - 00053:185:10199)



- 1915 181 Cuba Street, 24-26 Marion Street, picture theatre (00053:185:10199)
- 1943 181 Cuba Street, reinstate theatre (00056:284:B22779)
- 1957 181 Cuba Street, building alterations (00058:40:C2038)
- 1963 181 Cuba Street, building alterations – shop (00058:301:C13176)
- 1978 181 Cuba Street, building alterations - also cardock (00058:1145:C49393)
- 1984 181 Cuba Street, strengthen earthquake risk, building 6 (00058:0:C64177)
- 1984 181 Cuba Street, partitions, office work area, 2nd floor (00058:0:C65815)
- 1984 181 Cuba Street, Verandah (00058:0:C66482)
- 1985 181 Cuba Street, Business additions and alterations (00059:0:D786)
- 1996 181 Cuba Street, shop alterations (0060:211:355)

1.3 Occupation history⁴

Queen's Picture Theatre (Stones1920, 1925, 1930),

Rex Picture Theatre (Stones1935, 1940),

Time Picture Theatre (Stones1945, Wises1950-51)

Ceased theatre after this time

Tenants included: Robert Johnston, chemist (Stones1920, 1925), Billiard Saloon (Stones 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935, 1940, 1945, Wises 1950-51, 1961-62, 1967-68, 1971-72, 1975), 1980, Harraps Ltd, watchmakers (Stones1935, 1940, 1945, Wises 1950-51), Simpson's Quality Grocers (Stones1940, 1945, Wises 1950-51, 1955), Davis Bros Furniture Warehouse (Stones1955, 1961-62), Various furniture shops (Wises1967-68, 1971-72), Littlejohn's Instruments (Wises1975, 1980), Konditorei Aida (Wises1985, 1990).

⁴ Ibid

1.4 Architect⁵

James Bennie

‘James Bennie was born in Ayrshire, Scotland, immigrated to New Zealand in 1880 and settled in Brunnertown near Greymouth. In the early 1890s he attended the Working Men's College in Melbourne, Australia, where he studied under artist and architect Thomas Searell. On completion of his studies he returned to Greymouth and set up in practice as an architect. In 1903 Bennie moved to Wellington and went into practice with E C Farr before establishing his own practice in 1905. Some of Bennie's designs include the Albermarle Hotel, Wellington (1905), the Carnegie Library at Levin (1910), the Karori Methodist Church (1912), and the Oriental Bay Tea Kiosk (1912, demolished 1978). He designed a number of theatres including Kings (1910), Queens (1916), the Crown (1916) and Paramount (1917), all in Wellington and was also responsible for the design of many houses including the Wedge, Glenbervie Terrace (1906) and Bennie house, Salamanca road (1907) both in Wellington. He also had an interest in prefabricated house design. Bennie was an inaugural member of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, founded in 1905, and was later elected a Fellow. He retired in 1935 and his son Malcolm took over the Wellington practice.’

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

181 Cuba Street is a distinctive, albeit diminutive, two-storey Art Deco building that was once one of Wellington's finest cinemas.

The exterior façade has been much altered, and most of the applied decorative elements have been removed. The remaining features include a tri-part pediment that sits above sweeping string-course. The symmetrical first floor façade (to some extent) resembles a human face with pair of arched window ‘eyes’, a distinctive pair of ‘eye-brows’ and circular ‘bindi’ which give the building an anthropomorphic aspect that does not appear to be the architect's original intent.

The building is distinctly Art Deco in style, and this can be seen in the stylised ‘static’ forms of the ornamentation that were based on Classical precedents. The sweeping curves of the façade do however hint at a more organic, Art Nouveau, inspiration, which has risen in prominence with the removal of the original ornament and decorative features.

The modern bull-nosed verandah is a modern reinterpretation of vernacular style. The original verandah was, however, a simple rectangular plane that was fixed to the façade with steel ties. The shop front and interior of the building have been extensively altered since the time of construction and retains little of their original integrity.

⁵ Historic Places Trust, ‘James Bennie’, *Professional Biographies*, accessed 31 October 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Bennie,+James>

2.2 Materials

- Masonry structure
- Cement render
- Steel joinery and detailing

2.3 Setting

This building is found in block 4 of Cuba Street, between Ghuznee and Vivian Streets, and is included in the Cuba Street heritage area. This area is made up of a variety of buildings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of these are commercial premises that have had a number of uses throughout their lifetimes. This block has only three buildings that date from the late 20th century.

3.0 Sources

Historic Places Trust, 'James Bennie', *Professional Biographies*, accessed 31 October 2013,

<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Bennie,+James>

Kelly, Michael, and Russell Murray. *Cuba Street Heritage Area Report*. Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006.

Wellington City Council. *Cuba Street Heritage Area spreadsheet (blocks 1-3)*. Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006.

Wellington City Council. *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 1995*. Wellington City Council, 1995.

Papers Past

'Queen's Picture Theatre', Evening Post, 20 November 1916, Page 3, accessed 1 November 2013,

<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=EP19161120.2.24.10&srpos=9e=-----10--1---0Queens+theatre+wellington-->

Wellington City Archive

- 1915 181 Cuba Street, 24-26 Marion Street, picture theatre (00053:185:10199)
- 1943 181 Cuba Street, reinstate theatre (00056:284:B22779)
- 1957 181 Cuba Street, building alterations (00058:40:C2038)
- 1963 181 Cuba Street, building alterations – shop (00058:301:C13176)
- 1978 181 Cuba Street, building alterations - also cardock (00058:1145:C49393)
- 1984 181 Cuba Street, strengthen earthquake risk, building 6 (00058:0:C64177)
- 1984 181 Cuba Street, partitions, office work area, 2nd floor (00058:0:C65815)
- 1984 181 Cuba Street, Verandah (00058:0:C66482)
- 1985 181 Cuba Street, Business additions and alterations (00059:0:D786)
- 1996 181 Cuba Street, shop alterations (0060:211:355)

Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

Cultural heritage values

Aesthetic Value:

Architectural: *Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?*

181 Cuba Street is a pleasant, if much altered, example of an Art Deco cinema with some Art Nouveau influences. The first floor street façade is a lively and well-articulated composition that benefits from a well-conceived colour scheme.

Townscape: *Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?*

The building contributes to the character and sense of place of the Cuba Street Heritage Area

Group: *Is the item part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use?*

This two storey building is an important element in the historic area of Cuba Street and has high group value with the other buildings of the era in Cuba Street.

Historic Value:

Association: *Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?*

This building was constructed as one of Wellington's first movie-theatres and played an important social and historical role in early Wellington. It is associated with the Queen's Theatre Co, and with James Bennie the architect who designed it.

Association: *Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?*

Scientific Value:

Archaeological: *Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?*

This building is included in the NZAA Central City Archaeological Area R27/270, and is in an area known to be associated with pre 1900 human activity (European and Maori).

Educational: *Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?*

Technological: *Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?*

Social Value:

Public esteem: *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual: *Does the item have*

symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?

Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:

Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?

Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?

This building is an important part of the local community and makes a contribution to the wider setting of Cuba Street. It contributes significantly to the sense of place and continuity in the central city.

Sentiment/Connection: *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

Level of cultural heritage significance

Rare: *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

Representative: *Is the item a good example of the class it represents?*

This building is a good example of an adapted Art Deco building constructed in materials and using techniques common to the period.

Authentic: *Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?*

The building has been through a number of alterations, losing its original ornamental elements some time in the 1930s. The remaining original materials have high authenticity value.

Local/Regional/National/International

Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

This house is locally significant for its architectural, townscape, and group values, its historic associations, its archaeological values, and its authenticity.

4.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
WCC Records – building file		
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report		
Heritage Area Spreadsheet		
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website		
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

Background research

Insert any relevant background information into this section. This may include:

- *Additional plans, such as those for alterations*
- *Chunks of text from other sources such as Cyclopedia of NZ, Papers Past*
- *Additional images*