

# Historic Heritage Evaluation

Penthouse Cinema  
205 Ohiro Road



*Image: Wellington City Council 2006*

August 2021

Historic Heritage Evaluation	
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## Executive Summary

The Penthouse Cinema at 205 Ohiro Road was nominated for addition to the Wellington District Plan Schedule of Historic Heritage Buildings. As one of the few surviving suburban picture theatres still in operation in Wellington, the Penthouse Cinema has considerable historic and social significance.

The Vogue Theatre, as it was originally known, was constructed and opened in 1939, at the very end of the pre-war movie boom. Reginald D. Stowe, a little-known Wellington architect, designed the cinema for Ernest Ranish in September 1938. The builder was H. Edwards.

The increasing accessibility of television sets in private homes in the 1960s led to a decline in film attendance throughout the country. In 1962 cameraman Stan Wemyss purchased Vogue Cinema, adapted and relaunched it. Wemyss formed a television production company with Noel Peach, producer, and used the cinema to film television advertisements. After their production company moved to Auckland in the 1970s, the cinema was renamed 'Penthouse Cinema' and became a picture theatre once more. It has since been joined by many other art-house theatres, with the charm of the Penthouse Cinema having ongoing appeal for moviegoers.<sup>1</sup>

The Penthouse Cinema is recommended for inclusion on the Wellington District Plan Schedule of Historic Heritage Buildings. The scheduling should protect the exterior historic fabric of the building, including the front façade, the roof, and the north wall, all of which illustrate the original appearance of the building and are of a scale appropriate to its low-rise suburban setting. The modern alterations and additions to the south wall should be excluded from the listing.

## Summary Statement of Significance

The Penthouse Cinema has significant **aesthetic**, **townscape**, and **rarity** values. It is one of the few surviving operational suburban picture theatres in Wellington and has significant **historic** and **social** importance. The Cinema is a **fine example** of Art Deco style of architecture, popular in the 1930s. Penthouse Cinema's subsequent changes

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<sup>1</sup> Heritage New Zealand, "Embassy Theatre - Heritage New Zealand Listing 7500."



to the building reflect the changing attitudes of New Zealand society and are important within the film industry history.

## Purpose

The purpose of this document is to consider the Penthouse Cinema located at 205 Ohiro Road, Brooklyn, Wellington against Wellington City Council's criteria for evaluation of historic heritage.

The document has been prepared by NZ Heritage Properties Ltd on the specific instructions of our client, Wellington City Council. It is intended solely for the use by Wellington City Council in accordance with the agreed scope of work.

## Scope

This assessment is a desktop study based on online resources and material digitised from the Wellington City Council Archives. No site visit was undertaken. The interiors were not reviewed, other than from information determined through secondary sources and Council records. Values are considered against Wellington City Council and Greater Wellington Regional Council criteria for inclusion on the District Plan Heritage Schedule.

As with any heritage assessment, there were several constraints experienced in the preparation of this report. The major constraint experienced was a lack of detailed construction records. The chronology of the site was pieced together using primary sources such as *Papers Past*, Wellington City Council Archives, Alexander Turnbull Library, and Land Information NZ records. Some locally written online history articles were also useful.



# Heritage Inventory Report

Site Detail	
Site address or address(es) and/or location	205 Ohiro Road, Brooklyn
Property Name	Penthouse Cinema
Other names	Vogue Theatre
Legal Description(s) and Record of Title identifier(s), Deeds register and/or Gate notice information	Pt Lot 22 DP 392
NZTM grid reference	NZTM_E 1747639, _N 5425790
District Plan Reference Number	None
Sites of significance to Māori	None
WCC Heritage Area	None
HNZPT listed	Not listed
HNZPT category	None
Archaeological site (Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014, Section 6)	Unknown
New Zealand Archaeological Association (NZAA) site record number(s)	N/A
Constructed	1939
Significant alterations or additions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building alterations for a television studio in 1964.</li> <li>• Building additions and alterations, upgrade building back to a cinema in 1975.</li> <li>• A second theatre was opened behind the main auditorium in 1995.</li> <li>• A café fitout and deck addition to provide additional egress from Cinema 2 in 2001.</li> <li>• A third theatre called the 'Vogue Suite' added in 2004 with alterations and</li> </ul>



	<p>additions to cinema. There was an addition of a hallway and new toilet block at rear of existing building in 2004.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fourth theatre was added in 2006 on the southern elevation and a large carpark added.</li> <li>• Café space refurbished and extended kitchen into toilet area, 2008.</li> </ul>
Architect	Reginald D Stowe
Builder	H. Edwards
Former uses	Cinema, Television Studio
Current uses	Cinema/Movie Theatre
Earthquake-prone Building Status at the date of assessment.	MBIE EPB Register EPB N004683, Seismic Work to be completed by 24 January 2029

Extent: WCC Onemap June 2021



## Historical Summary

### Land History

Wellington's nearly circular harbour (about 10 kilometres in diameter) began as a shallow basin between two tilted land blocks. Repeated uplifting along the Wellington Fault raised the block on the western side, creating a cliff from Thorndon to the Hutt Valley. The block to the east tilted down towards the fault, creating a depression that later filled with water.<sup>2</sup> Matiu (Somes Island) and Mākaro (Ward Island) are the exposed peaks of a submerged ridge running parallel with the extensive ridges of Miramar Peninsula and Hataitai.<sup>3</sup>

The area which became Wellington, Te Whanganui-a-Tara had been occupied for centuries by various Māori groups.<sup>4</sup> Two tribes of Ngai Tara (in the Wellington area from c1405-1650) and Ngāti Ira (in the Wellington area until 1829) amalgamated and became known as Ngāti Ira. Ngāti Ira were the inhabitants of Te Whanganui-a-Tara and its environs including Porirua and the area up the Kapiti Coast.<sup>5</sup> The principal chief of Ngāti Ira in the late 1810s, Whanake and his son Te Kekerengu both lived on the west coast of Wellington near Porirua Harbour.

Incoming tribes from far to the north of Wellington area began to push out Ngati Ira and they faced consistent pressure as an influx of people continued from western Waikato and Taranaki.<sup>6</sup> Many war parties and migration of other tribes, such as Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Whatua, and Ngāti Toa, drove the last remaining Ngāti Ira out of the area.<sup>7</sup> Ngāti Toa and its allies defeated Ngāti Ira and gained ascendancy over the Kapiti Coast in 1824, although some Ngāti Ira continued to live at Porirua.<sup>8</sup> By 1840, the groups holding customary rights within the Port Nicholson block were complex, with Te Āti Awa, Taranaki, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Tama, and Ngāti Toa all claiming rights. These rights had been established through conquest, occupation, and use of resources.

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<sup>2</sup> Adkins, "The Great Harbour of Tara. Traditional Place Names and Sites of Wellington Harbour and Environs."

<sup>3</sup> Adkins.

<sup>4</sup> Report, "Te Whanganui A Tara Me Ona Takiwa - Report on the Wellington District."

<sup>5</sup> Murray, "A History of Tawa."

<sup>6</sup> Report, "Te Whanganui A Tara Me Ona Takiwa - Report on the Wellington District."

<sup>7</sup> Murray, "A History of Tawa."

<sup>8</sup> Murray.



The wider Wellington region then and now hosted a number of iwi, including Te Āti Awa, Muaupoko, Rangitāne o Wairarapa, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Toa (Ngāti Toarangatira), Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai.<sup>9</sup>

It was in this complex setting that in 1839, the New Zealand Company chose Wellington, or as they named it, Port Nicholson as the site for its first settlement of British immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

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Māori knew the hills—which would become part of the suburb of Brooklyn—as Turanga-rere, translated as "the waving plumes of a war-party".

European settlement began in the modern-day Brooklyn area during the 1840s.<sup>11</sup> The district of Ohiro was established in the early 1840s and was gradually subdivided into smaller blocks. In 1852 John Fitchett purchased several of these blocks and established a dairy farm called Ohiro, known also as Fitchett's Farm.<sup>12</sup> A township named Fitchett Town formed in the 1860s. It was not until 1888 the area of Brooklyn was created, when then land-owners Ashton B. Fitchett and R.B. Todman offered the main subdivision for sale.<sup>13</sup>

In 1899 a further subdivision took place, and the main roads of Mitchell and Todman Streets were formed with other streets soon following. In 1902 Ashton B. Fitchett sold additional lots of land and Brooklyn was extended further up into the Brooklyn Hills.

A new tramway route opened in 1906. Unlike the existing route to Brooklyn via Aro Street and Ohiro Road which had excessively steep gradients, the new route was cut through the town belt by Central Park.<sup>14</sup> This route later became today's Brooklyn Road. The tramway closed in 1957, and the City-Brooklyn route is now served by buses.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Moving Pictures**

This section provides the results of documentary research into the historical background of the Penthouse Cinema. This research provides context and informs our understanding of the heritage values remaining in the structure.

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<sup>9</sup> "Brooklyn Wellington."

<sup>10</sup> Report, "Te Whanganui A Tara Me Ona Takiwa - Report on the Wellington District."

<sup>11</sup> "Brooklyn Wellington."

<sup>12</sup> "Brooklyn Wellington."

<sup>13</sup> "Brooklyn Wellington."

<sup>14</sup> "Brooklyn Wellington."

<sup>15</sup> "Brooklyn Wellington."



'Moving pictures' blossomed just before the end of the nineteenth century in countries around the world. The pictures were a relatively cheap and simple form of providing entertainment to the masses. The first films in Wellington were shown at vaudeville shows or temporary premises such as halls and theatres. The public demand was huge, and the first purpose-built picture theatres arrived during the 1910s. The heyday of film was after World War I and before the arrival of television in the early 1960s. Going to the cinema was arguably Wellington's most popular form of entertainment for most of the twentieth century and dozens of picture theatres were built to satisfy demand, both in the city and suburbs. By the later 1930s, Brooklyn films were still being shown in what was known as Fulford's Hall in Cleveland Street, which still stands.<sup>16</sup> The suburb was about to get its first purpose-built cinema.

### **Vogue Theatre**

In 1938 Ernest Ranish, picture-theatre owner and businessman, purchased Pt Lot 22 DP 392 on Ohiro Road. In September 1938 Ranish commissioned noted architectural firm Crichton McKay & Haughton and Reginald D. Stowe, a little-known Wellington architect, to design a new cinema. He instructed the architects to base the design on King's Theatre in Dixon Street - the first purpose-built cinema in New Zealand. King's Theatre had just been remodelled into the fashionable Art Deco style. Ranish decided on Stowe's design; the Crichton McKay & Haughton design did not get past concept stage. Tenders were soon advertised, and builder H. Edwards won the contract. In 1939, the 'Vogue Theatre' opened on Brooklyn's main thoroughfare, at the very end of the pre-war film boom.

### **Art Deco**

In accordance with Ranish's instructions, the Vogue Theatre was designed in the Art Deco style. The inter-war period was a rich time for Wellington architecture. New architectural styles appeared, based partly on the past and with a look to the future. Buildings got bigger, heavy decorations were shed, and sleeker forms were favoured.<sup>17</sup>

Art Deco, the style most associated with the 1930s, arose out of the Industrial and Decorative Arts Exhibition in Paris in 1925. It was characterised by simplified ornamentation and an emphasis on geometrical decoration; the use of applied ornament creating an image of modernity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wellington City Council, "Thematic Heritage Study of Wellington."

<sup>17</sup> Kelly, "Art Deco in the Capital Heritage Trail."

<sup>18</sup> Duncan, "Encyclopedia of Art Deco: An Illustrated Guide to a Decorative Style From 1920 to 1939."



## From Vogue to Penthouse

The Vogue Theatre was one of the last suburban picture theatres opened in Wellington. In common with other suburban cinemas, it offered evening films, Saturday features and regular series.

In 1951 owner Ernest Ranish retired and leased the cinema to Lee Hill and Stan Wemyss (grandfather of actor Russell Crowe). Both men were involved with filmmaking and had backgrounds in war footage. They formed the Vogue Theatre Company to manage the cinema. Sadly, in 1952 Hill died from a heart attack while hanging posters outside the cinema. Wemyss continued to run the cinema, but the glory days of film were coming to an end.

In the early 1960s, the Vogue Theatre was licensed to open six days a week, but by 1963 was only open on weekends. The increasing number of television sets in private homes was largely responsible for this change. The New Zealand Government announced in 1960 that the state would operate a nationwide television service.<sup>19</sup> Television licences were introduced in August 1960 and in that year 4808 licences were issued.<sup>20</sup> By 1965 more than 434, 877 licences had been issued across New Zealand.<sup>21</sup> The increase in access to television saw a corresponding decrease in cinema audience numbers. Compounding the problem increased access to cars meant people began to drive into the city for entertainment, and suburban cinemas suffered accordingly. Cinema buildings were also often in poor condition, as they had little in the way of modernisation or maintenance since the advent of 'the talkies'.<sup>22</sup> Due to declining audience numbers, Vogue Theatre closed its doors on 24 July 1963.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, though television was the downfall of the cinema generally, it may well have been the saviour of the Vogue Theatre. Soon after 1963, Wemyss formed a television production company with producer Noel Peach. Wemyss purchased the cinema from Ranish and used it as a set to film television advertisements.<sup>24</sup> The company continued to operate out of the old cinema until 1972 when they relocated to Auckland. Peach Wemyss Limited sold the former cinema to Temple Holdings Limited.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Television in New Zealand."

<sup>20</sup> "History of Television - the Early Years."

<sup>21</sup> Knuckly, "Movie-Going in New Zealand, 1950-1980."

<sup>22</sup> Knuckly.

<sup>23</sup> "Penthouse Cinema."

<sup>24</sup> "Penthouse Cinema."

<sup>25</sup> "Penthouse Cinema."



In 1975 Merv and Carol Kisby, who leased part of the building from Temple Holdings, re-opened the cinema for Brooklyn, renaming it 'Penthouse Cinema'. Business went well and in 1979 the Kisbys, under their company name Wellington Amusements Limited, purchased the cinema. The Kisbys became renowned for reviving independent art-house theatre in Wellington.<sup>26</sup> They also owned the Paramount Theatre, the only other independent theatre in the city at the time, and they hosted Wellington's first film festivals. Carol Kisby later said in an interview about the Penthouse Cinema that "we opened it to be the only art cinema around, one of the first ones in New Zealand...The Penthouse has been our baby ... People like the cinema so much because of the ambience of the place, the fact we are not all neon lights, not all glittery."<sup>27</sup> The cinema's bar was also very popular as a meeting place.<sup>28</sup>

In recent years, with interest in films revived and the Kisbys at the helm, the Penthouse Cinema has flourished. Movie audiences increased to the extent that in 1997 a second cinema was opened behind the main theatre. A modern café created in the back part of the foyer and the auditorium opening off this space means there is little evidence of the original foyer and internal form of the building. A third, more intimate theatre called the 'Vogue Suite' was later opened. A fourth theatre was added in 2006 on the southern elevation.<sup>29</sup> Recently accentuated by a bold colour scheme, today the Penthouse Cinema provides a quality period setting that has enhanced its reputation as an interesting venue for movie-going.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Geraghty, "Iconic Brooklyn Cinema Turns 70."

<sup>27</sup> Geraghty.

<sup>28</sup> Manson, "Carol Kisby, Wellington Cinema Mover and Shaker."

<sup>29</sup> Wellington City Council, "Penthouse Cinema 205 Ohiro Road PFG Summary Report."

<sup>30</sup> Wellington City Council.



## Photographs and Images



*The Vogue Theatre photographed having just undergone restoration and shortly before it reopened in 1975 and renamed the Penthouse Cinema.<sup>31</sup>*



*Penthouse Cinema 1977.<sup>32</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> Fearnley Charles J, "Vogue Theatre 1975."

<sup>32</sup> "Penthouse Cinema, 1977."





Film set at Vogue Theatre 20/11/61, photographed by K E Niven and Co of Wellington.<sup>33</sup>

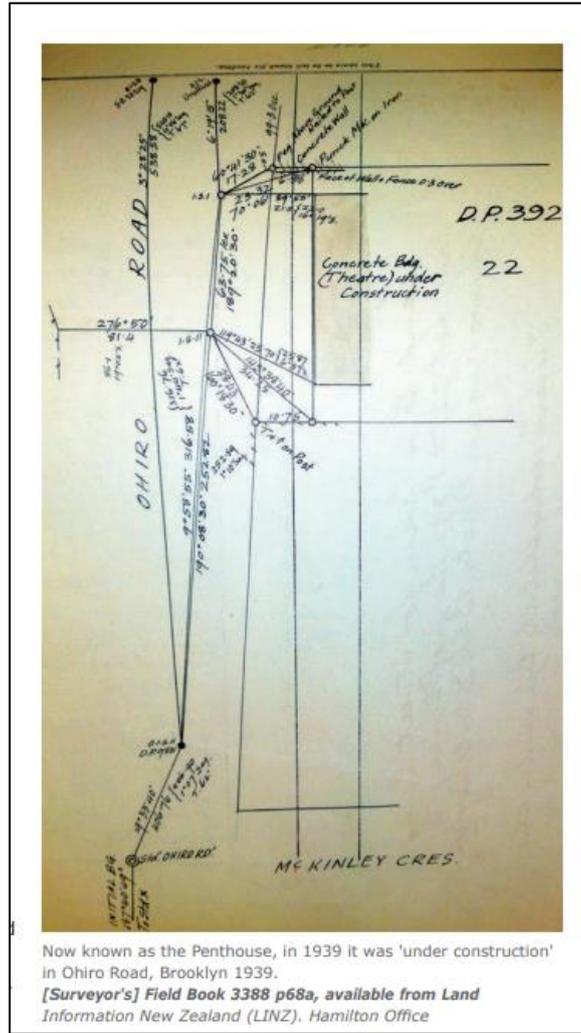


Front of Cinema, 1994, Property File 1996-2004, Ref 00666-213751, Wellington City Council Archives.

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<sup>33</sup> Nivem, K.E. and Co, "Film Set at Vogue Theatre."





Now known as the Penthouse, in 1939 it was 'under construction' in Ohio Road, Brooklyn 1939. [Surveyor's] Field Book 3388 p68a, available from Land Information New Zealand (LINZ). Hamilton Office

In 1939 The Penthouse Cinema was 'under construction' in Ohio Road, Brooklyn 1939. [Surveyor's] Field Book 3388 p88a, available from Land Information New Zealand (LINZ), Hamilton Office.





Ohiro Road looking toward Brooklyn Village. The Penthouse Cinema is halfway up on the right. Photographer Amy Jackman, Fairfax Media, Dominion Post, 18 September 2014.

## Chronologies and Timelines

### Timeline of events, including modifications

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1939 | Picture Theatre designed by Reginald D. Stowe and built by H. Edwards (WCC Archives B18689).                      |
| 1964 | Building Alterations, (WCC Archives C15755).  |
| 1975 | Building additions and alterations, (WCC Archives C43892).  |
| 1975 | Upgrade building, (WCC Archives C43127).  |
| 1995 | Office alterations, second cinema added (WCC Building Consents 1995, 12053).                                      |
| 2001 | Café Fitout, (WCC Archives 72860).  |
| 2001 | Deck addition to provide additional egress from Cinema 2, (WCC 81772).  |
| 2002 | New stock room to rear and extend office on level 1, (WCC 85829).   |
| 2004 | Alterations and additions to cinema. Add hallway and new toilet block at rear of existing building, (WCC 120736). |
| 2005 | New Cinema 4 with carparking, (WCC 123647).   |
| 2008 | Refurbish café space and extend kitchen into toilet area, (WCC 187465).   |



## Occupation history

1939-1951	Constructed for Ernest Ranish. Vogue Theatre (original name) opened on 15 June 1939.
1951 – 1963	Managed by Vogue Company Ltd (owned by Lee Hill and Stan Wemyss). Cinema closed 24 July 1963.
1963 – 1972	Wemyss formed a television company with Noel Peach (Peach Wemyss Limited) and purchased Theatre from Ernest Ranish. Theatre converted into a television studio where television commercials were filmed.
1972-1975	Temple Holding Limited.
1975-1979	Merv and Carol Kisby renamed the building 'Penthouse Cinema', and the original theatre was converted and refurbished.
1979-current	Owned by Wellington Amusements Holdings Limited and run as a multi-screened cinema.

## Biographies

### Reginald D. Stowe - Architect

Little is known about Reginald D. Stowe, the architect of the Vogue Theatre. He had offices located at 55 Courtenay Place and specialised in theatre buildings as an architect for the company New Zealand Theatres Ltd. New Zealand Theatres Ltd was previously known as Kemball's Theatres Ltd which controlled around 30 moving-picture theatres in Wellington.<sup>34</sup> Kemball later sold his approximately 40 picture theatres in the lower North Island to rival movie mogul, Robert Kerridge. Reginald Stowe also designed the Regent Theatre in Pahiatua, which opened in 1940.<sup>35</sup>

### Stan Wemyss – Cameraman

*Biography from NZOnScreen Iwi Whitiāhua <https://www.nzonscreen.com/profile/stan-wemyss/biography>.*

<sup>34</sup> "Wellington Theatres."

<sup>35</sup> "Advertisements Column"; "Municipal Theatre and Borough Building."



During a career that spanned at least four decades, Stan Wemyss did time as a government cameraman, was part of a busy commercials company, and made shows for television. Wemyss would carry his love of film down the line; when Russell Crowe won an Oscar for *Gladiator*, he made a point of thanking Wemyss, his grandfather on his mother's side, for having provided inspiration.

Stanley James Wemyss was born in the Wairarapa town of Carterton in 1916. Wemyss was working as an artist when he joined the Government Film Studios in 1938. At this point the organisation handled both filmmaking and posters, much of it aimed at tourists. When World War II began, the government's filmmaking efforts were rechannelled with an eye to publicising the war effort, and the New Zealand National Film Unit was born. By 1941 Wemyss had become a cameraman and was one of a small number of New Zealanders heading overseas to film Kiwi forces abroad.

Although Wemyss filmed for a few months in North Africa, hopes of relieving cameramen for the NZ Army Film Unit were thwarted, partly because he was classified as a civilian.

Wemyss had more luck — plus some very close calls — on the island of Bougainville (later part of Papua New Guinea). There he filmed Fijian troops fighting in close quarters against unseen Japanese troops for the *Weekly Review* newsreel series. Wemyss was interviewed about the encounter for the 'Final Peace' episode of *The Years Back* series; he described being close enough to the action to hear troops talking in two languages he couldn't understand, and at one point pitching a grenade himself. In 1947, "on the advice of His Majesty's New Zealand Ministers", Wemyss was awarded an MBE for his services as a war correspondent.

In the period after the end of the war, he also travelled across Asia following New Zealand prisoners of war, for *Weekly Review* No. 215.

In 1950 Wemyss left the job and began a decade running the Vogue Theatre in Wellington, with his wife Joy. The following decade his career took another new path, when he began making commercials with Kelvin Peach and his father Noel. The latter were based in Auckland, while Wemyss filmed in the Vogue, which closed as a cinema in 1963. Originally known by the company name Peach Wemyss, the business was also variously known as Peach Wemyss Astor and PWA Film Productions.

Wemyss was a prolific producer of commercials over at least three decades, along the way handling high profile clients like Hoover, Batts and Fisher and Paykel. Under the title Film Makers, the company also made industrial films



documenting a number of Ministry of Works roading projects and produced a children's puppet show for the state broadcaster in the first half of the 60s.

The following decade Wemyss directed a story on Māori tribal land for doco slot *Survey*. In 1974 he produced one of his only fictional projects, after Peach Wemyss Astor joined forces with a bunch of emerging Wellington talents from the Blerta performance collective. The result was one-off television drama *Uenuku*, directed by Geoff Murphy. This respectful adaptation of the Māori legend of Hinepūkohurangi marked one of the first times a Māori story appeared on New Zealand television. It was also the first screen production to use all te reo Māori dialogue. Stan Wemyss continued to work on commercials for many years after *Uenuku*. He passed away in 1988.

### Lee Hill – Cinematographer<sup>36</sup>

Leighton (Lee) McLeod Hill (13 March 1907 – 5 June 1952) was a New Zealand filmmaker and cinematographer. He was born in Carterton, attended Carterton School and Dannevirke High School, and died in Wellington.

He worked for J.E. Vinsen for ten years and as freelancer. He also worked with Rudall Hayward in the 1920s, making local "community comedies", but later made some himself in competition with Hayward e.g. *Frances of Fielding*. He was an Army photographer in the 2NZEF in World War II, being captured at Sidi Aziz in 1941 and spent several years as a German prisoner-of-war.

At the end of the war, he was in Oflag IX A/Z at Rotenburg an der Fulda, where he showed German silent films to prisoners. When the camp was marched east in 1945, he took a series of photographs of the march.

After the war he was associated with Apex Films Ltd and his own Television Films Ltd. He also likely spent time in Hollywood. In an interview with Ronald Sinclair about the filming of *Down on the Farm*, *Phar Lap's Son* and *The Wagon and the Star*, Sinclair said that: "It was Lee Hill that all of us relied on for guiding us in the production. He came to New Zealand from Hollywood, with a Hollywood background to put to use. Such background was considered vital, and Hill was highly revered by all of us because of the experience he brought with him."<sup>37</sup>

### Noel Peach – recording engineer and producer<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> "Lee Hill (Cinematographer)."

<sup>37</sup> "Lee Hill (Cinematographer)."

<sup>38</sup> "Peach Wemyss Astor."



Noel Peach was a pioneering New Zealand recording engineer and producer and was the owner of Peach Wemyss Astor. Peach Wemyss Astor grew out of Astor Recording Studios in Auckland, which, during the 1950s, under Noel Peach's leadership, provided sound recording facilities to music recording labels such as TANZA as well as companies wishing to make radio commercials. When commercial television arrived in New Zealand on 1 April 1961, a new market was created for TV advertising, and Peach joined with filmmaker Stan Wemyss to form a company that could cater to this new creative medium.

Peach Wemyss Astor was a full-service production company, with operations in both Auckland and Wellington. It continued to grow – with Noel Peach's son, Kelvin, working alongside and soon succeeding him – into the 1960s. The company maintained a large specialist staff, including film and radio recording and editing staff, full-time makeup artists, an art department, electricians, and administrative support.<sup>39</sup>

### **Merv and Carol Kisby – cinema owners<sup>40</sup>**

Carol Ferguson was born and raised in Whangarei. After leaving school she moved to Auckland, where she worked as a cashier at Kerridge Odeon's Majestic Theatre in Queen Street. While working there she met Walter Mervyn (Merv) Kisby, who was a trainee projectionist. Merv was born in 1934 and had worked in the film exhibition industry since 1949. They married in 1958 and by the 1960s had moved to Wellington.

They took over the Paramount Cinema in 1967 and went on to open the Gold Coast Cinema in Paraparaumu. In 1975 they purchased the Vogue Theatre. The couple also ran weekend cinemas in community halls in Porirua and Titahi Bay.

When every other cinema in town turned down the opportunity to be involved in the fledgling Wellington Film Society Festival, Carol and Merv were prepared to take a chance. They welcomed the first Wellington Film Festival to the Paramount Theatre in 1972. The Kisbys often travelled to Australia and the United States, buying screening rights for films, and sometimes profitted on movies booked by Kerridge or Amalgamated, but rejected prematurely as box office duds.

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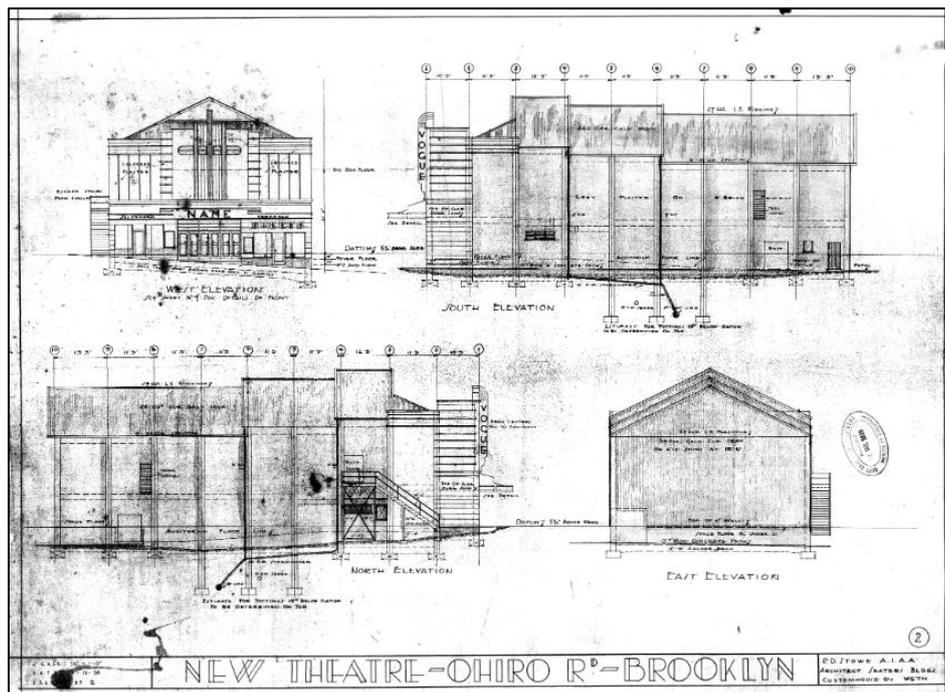
<sup>39</sup> "Peach Wemyss Astor."

<sup>40</sup> Manson, "Carol Kisby, Wellington Cinema Mover and Shaker."



While Merv looked after the administration, Carol was the 'life and soul' of the booking office and, later, the cinema's popular bar. Carol knew her patrons by name and seat number. For the first few years she would take all the bookings for every screening. Once, when thieves stole a stash of envelopes containing festival tickets, Carol was able to remember who had tickets to see what, even recalling their seat numbers.<sup>41</sup>

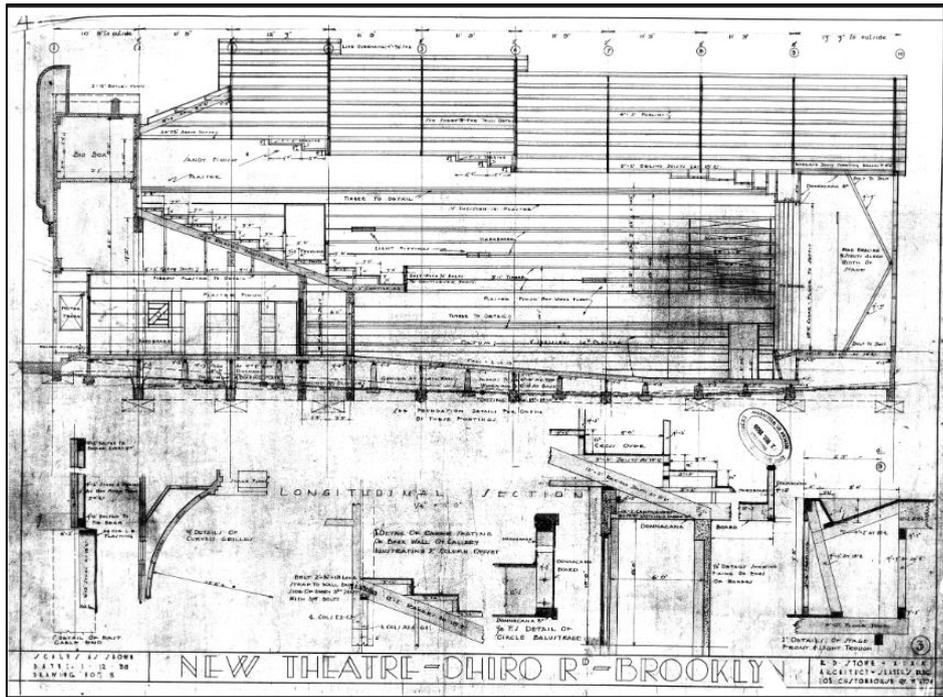
## Plans and Elevations



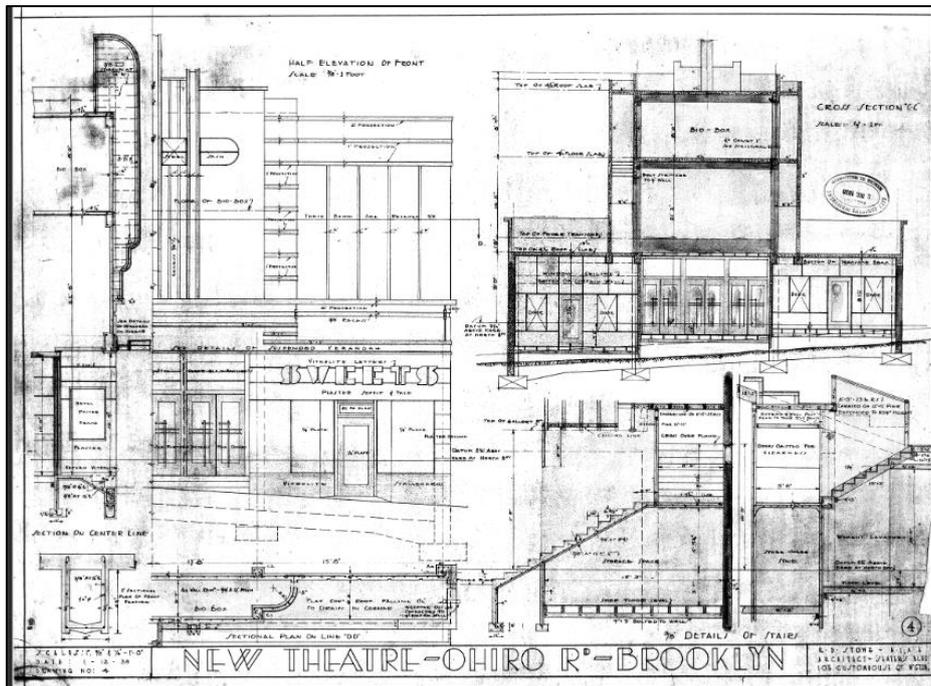
*New Theatre Ohio Road, Brooklyn, 1939, Building Plan B18689, Wellington City Council Archives.*

<sup>41</sup> Manson.



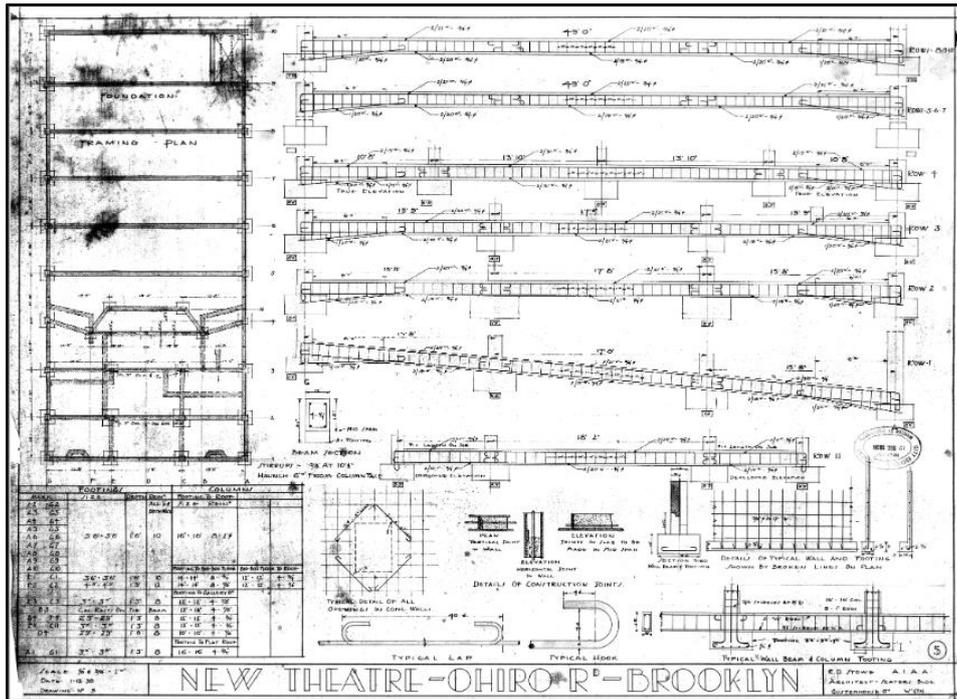


New Theatre Ohio Road, Brooklyn, 1939, Building Plan B18689, Wellington City Council Archives.

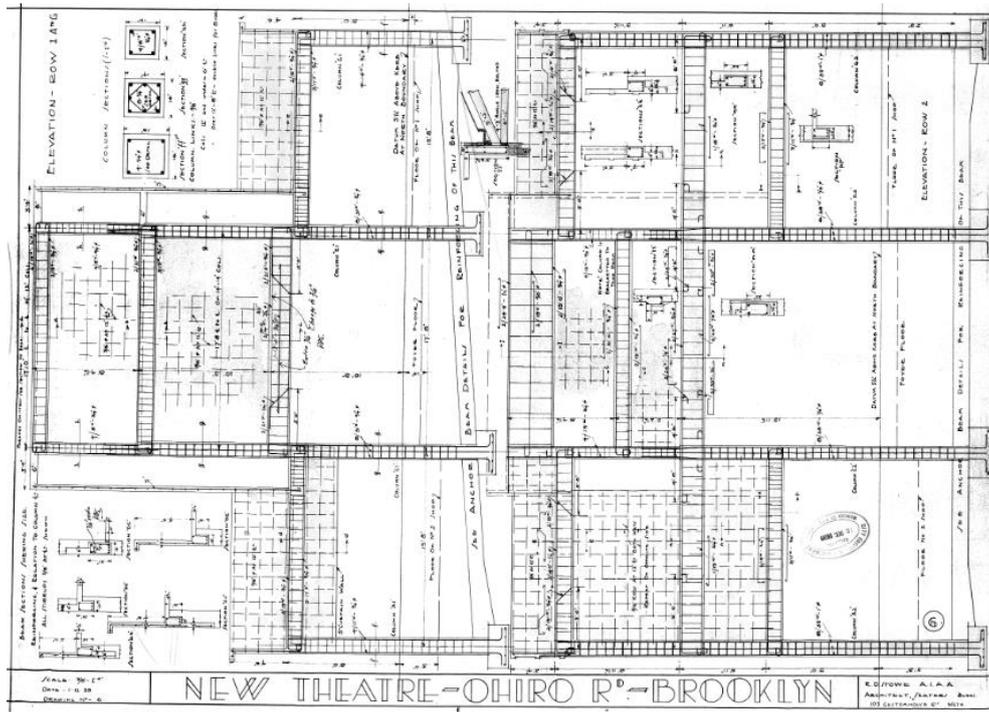


New Theatre Ohio Road, Brooklyn, 1939, Building Plan B18689, Wellington City Council Archives.



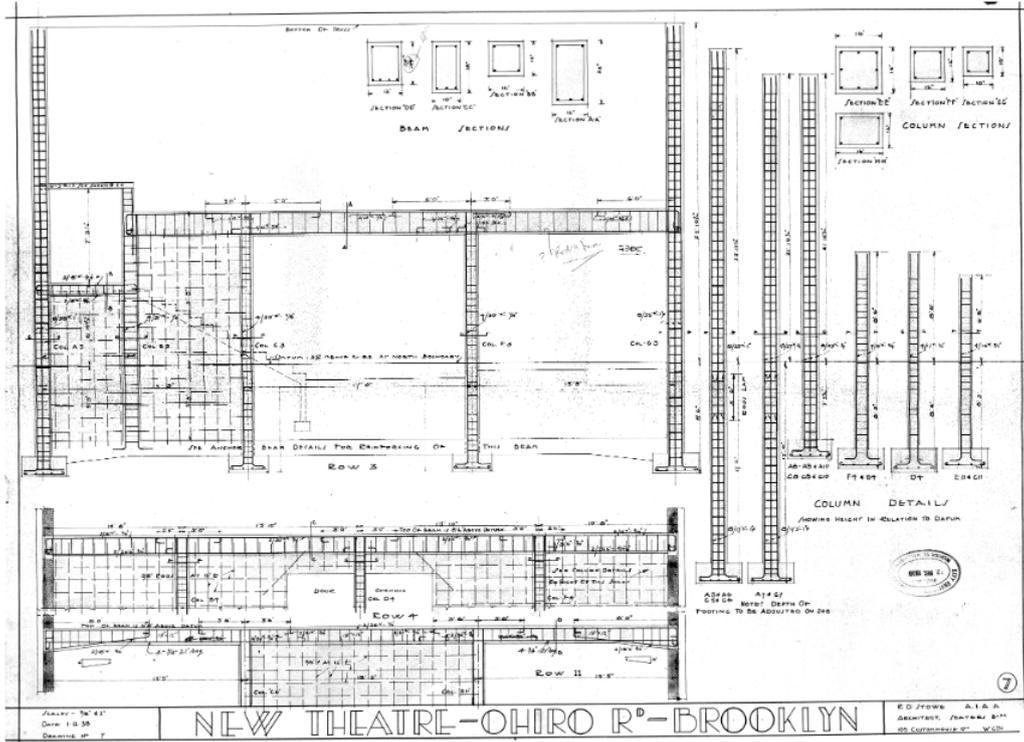


New Theatre Ohio Road, Brooklyn, 1939, Building Plan B18689, Wellington City Council Archives.

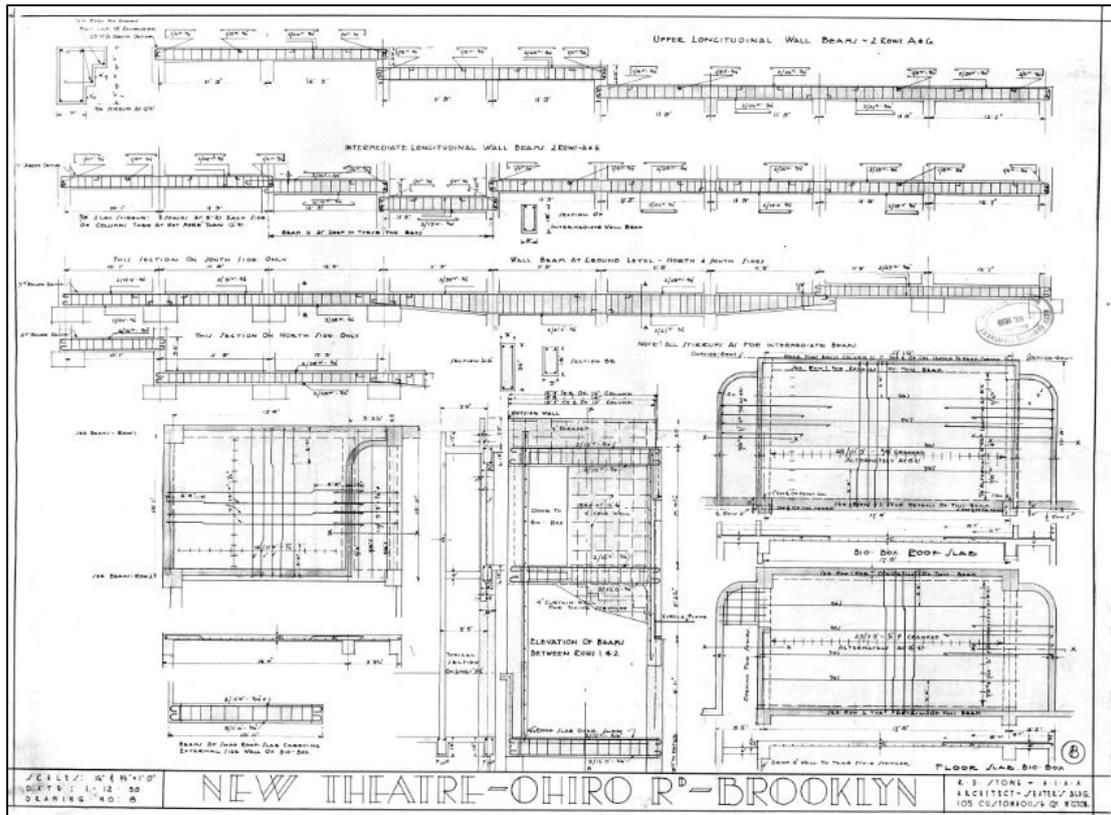


New Theatre Ohio Road, Brooklyn, 1939, Building Plan B18689, Wellington City Council Archives.





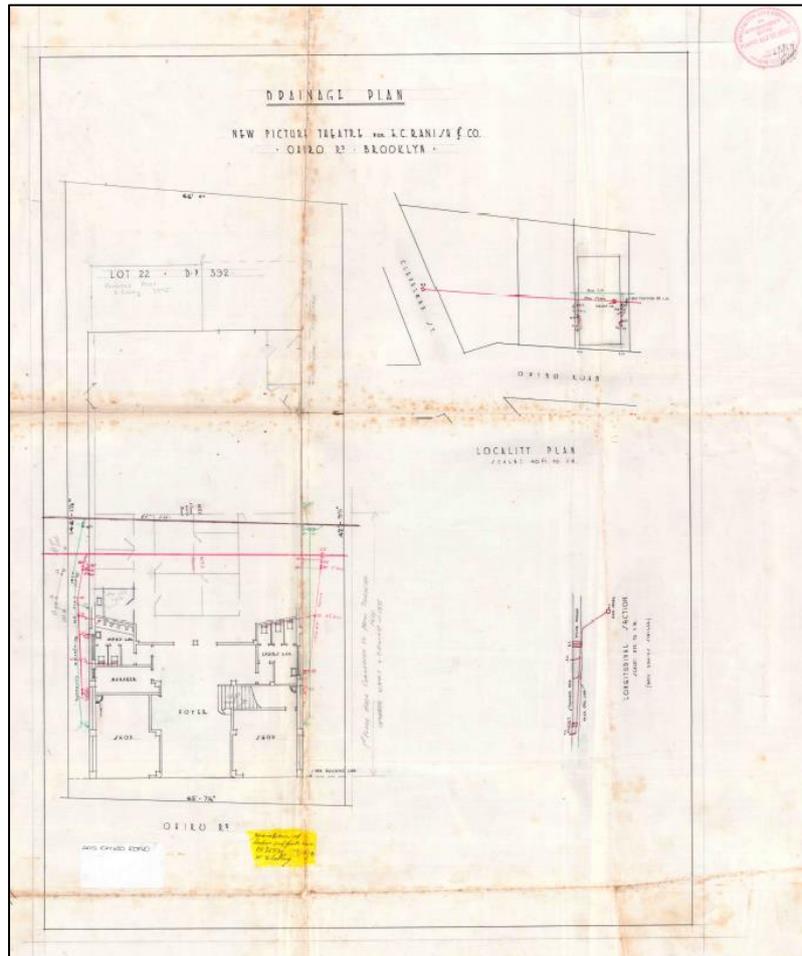
New Theatre Ohio Road, Brooklyn, 1939, Building Plan B18689, Wellington City Council Archives.



New Theatre Ohio Road, Brooklyn, 1939, Building Plan B18689, Wellington City Council Archives.







*Drainage Plan 1959, Building File 00432-32956, Wellington City Council Archives.*

## Physical Description

### Setting – geographical / physical context

Ohiro Road begins at Aro Street and ends in Happy Valley with the suburb of Brooklyn in between. Ohiro Road runs through Central Park and Tanera Park, and Brooklyn Village south towards 'Carlucci Land', a mini-golf course set amongst hillside sculptures. In the 1880s, Ohiro Road was one of the main roads out of the city, often traversed by horse and cart.

The Penthouse Cinema stands on the edge of Brooklyn's commercial shopping centre, marking the transition to the residential area further down Ohiro Road. There are a number of other period buildings in the nearby area with the distinctive 1903 commercial building on the corner of Ohiro Road and Todman Street, listed on the Wellington District Scheme (6/ 406).



## Buildings or structures

Penthouse Cinema displays a distinctive architectural style with emphasis on its façade. The façade is largely Art Deco style, with some curvature more associated with the Moderne style. The façade is also notable in that it incorporates the projector room which contributes to the façade's distinctive form. The remaining building form is largely functional with little to no visible ornamentation.

Built during the pinnacle of cinematic theatre, Penthouse Cinema was built to reflect its function, with its front façade designed to echo the glamour and thrill of Hollywood. The Art Deco architectural style was used around the world for the great movie cinemas of the late 1920s and 30s. The Art Deco period coincided with the conversion of silent films to sound, and movie companies built large theatres to capture the huge audiences that came to see movies. Movie theatres in the 1920s often combined exotic themes with Art Deco style; for example, Grauman's 1922 Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood was inspired by ancient Egyptian tombs and pyramids. In the late 1930s, a new variety of Art Deco architecture became common; called Streamline Moderne or simply Streamline. Buildings in this style had rounded corners and long horizontal lines; were built of reinforced concrete and were almost always white.<sup>42</sup> The Penthouse Cinema represents a combination of these architectural styles. The exterior style is reflective of a period of cinema theatre, built before television, that has not been replicated since. On the interior, however, the Cinema has been adapted to provide a multi-theatre experience while retaining original architectural elements, the best of both worlds.

The following description is from a 2005 report on the Penthouse Cinema.<sup>43</sup>

Below the verandah, at the ground floor, the façade retains its original configuration with the main doors to the theatre in the centre, and retail spaces on either side, although little original fabric remains in this area. Above the verandah, the façade is mostly original. The most distinctive feature of the building at this level is created by the projection room being set forward of the main façade, enclosed by horizontal bands on the side walls which emphasise the generously rounded 'Moderne' corners, and contrasted in the centre by a striking vertical fluted Art Deco motif that breaks the line of the parapet above.

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<sup>42</sup> Duncan, "Encyclopedia of Art Deco: An Illustrated Guide to a Decorative Style From 1920 to 1939," 197–99.

<sup>43</sup> "Penthouse Cinema."



A jazzy modern colour scheme draws attention to these features.<sup>44</sup>

The enclosure of the remainder of the building (principally the auditorium) is a utilitarian and unpainted plastered concrete box with expressed columns and tie beams to the outside.<sup>45</sup> This is covered by a large gabled roof in tiered sections supported on trusses across the main auditorium and clad in corrugated iron.

The subsequent changes to the building reflect the changing attitudes of New Zealand society to film. To attract cinema-goers back into the theatre, more cinema screens were built. In 2005, the entrance foyer retains interesting original features such as the ticket booth.<sup>46</sup> Major changes have seen a modern café created in the back part of the foyer and a new auditorium opening off this space. The original foyer and internal form remain unaltered, otherwise it appears little internal fabric remains as designed. The main auditorium is reached via a staircase on the right, which was the original stair to the dress circle. A new floor has allowed two smaller theatres to be created within the original space of the stalls.<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, it should also be noted that the classic flat roof style of the period has been severely undermined by the installation of what appears to be a cell tower atop the building. This tower detracts considerably from the overall form of the building and negatively impacts upon the façade.

## Materials

- Concrete
- Structural Steel
- Corrugated roof iron

## Archaeological sites

None.

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<sup>44</sup> Wellington City Council, "Penthouse Cinema 205 Ohiro Road PFG Summary Report."

<sup>45</sup> Wellington City Council.

<sup>46</sup> "Penthouse Cinema."

<sup>47</sup> Wellington City Council, "Penthouse Cinema 205 Ohiro Road PFG Summary Report."



## Setting – surroundings / site description

From the street, the Penthouse Cinema is a lively and interesting building and well-scaled for its location. Although not as prominent as its neighbours in nearby Todman Street, it contributes to the ambience of the group of heritage buildings in Brooklyn's shopping area. The interior provides a quality period setting that has enhanced its reputation as an interesting venue for movie-going.<sup>48</sup>

## HNZPT Extent of List Entry

N/A

## Comparative Analysis Summary

Along with the Penthouse Cinema, there are two other cinemas that have survived and flourished in Wellington.

The Embassy Theatre, a purpose-built theatre erected in 1924, is a particularly fine early-twentieth-century cinema, noted for its classical Greek Revival exterior. There are similar modifications and additions to the two theatres as owners modernised and adapted the buildings to keep up to date with technologies in film. Both the Embassy and the Penthouse Cinemas have long served Wellington's film-going community and their history reflects the entertainment industry's changes.

The Paramount Theatre is a late Edwardian theatre and the only survivor of several theatres designed by James Bennie. The façade, including the 1927 parapet, is authentic above verandah level and contributes to the Courtenay Place Heritage Area. Its degree of integrity is similar to Penthouse Cinema's high level of authenticity. The Paramount Theatre is Wellington's oldest surviving purpose-built cinema. It screened the first "talkie" shown in Australasia in 1929 and was used until 2017 as a venue for the Wellington Film Festival and for art-house cinema under its original name Paramount Cinema. Both the Penthouse Cinema and Paramount Theatre were run in the 1970s by the Kisbys and helped revive film festivals in Wellington.

The Penthouse Cinema has similar authenticity to these two theatres and is important in the story of New Zealand film. While the Penthouse Cinema is not as

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<sup>48</sup> Wellington City Council.



grand as the Embassy and the Paramount, it is just as authentic and retains its original Art Deco features. It is also associated with significant people of the Wellington film and creative community. The Paramount and the Embassy Theatres are already scheduled on the Wellington District Plan Schedule of Historic Heritage buildings and are entered on Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga's List Rārangi Kōrero.

## Evaluation Criteria

***A. Historic values: these relate to the history of a place and how it demonstrates important historical themes, events, people or experiences.***

***(i) Themes: the place is associated with important themes in history or patterns of development.***

The Penthouse Cinema is **regionally significant** as a building associated with the themes of cinema, meeting places, and television stations. It is **historically significant** as an example of an early surviving cinema and is associated with the revival of Wellington independent art house theatre during the 1970s. The cinema housed production of early television advertisements in the 1960s and is an important place in the development and adaption of the artistic and creative culture of Wellington.

***(ii) Events: the place has an association with an important event or events in local, regional or national history.***

The Penthouse Cinema is closely associated with the establishment of early Wellington film festivals in the 1970s, and therefore has **some significance regionally**.

***(iii) People: the place is associated with the life or works of an individual, group or organisation that has made a significant contribution to the district, region or nation***



The Penthouse Cinema is associated with a number of key people within cinema, film making, and production, as well as war-time film correspondents. Penthouse Cinema has **some significance** for its connection to Lee Hill and Stan Wemyss, who awarded an MBE for services as a war correspondent. The association of Penthouse Cinema with Merv and Carol Kisby is also **significant** as they are credited with reviving independent art-house theatre in Wellington at the Penthouse Cinema.

**(iv) Social: the place is associated with everyday experiences from the past and contributes to our understanding of the culture and life of the district, region or nation.**

The Penthouse Cinema has **regionally significant** social values. The cinema was one of Wellington's most popular forms of entertainment and dozens of picture theatres were built to satisfy demand. Penthouse Cinema was one of the few suburban theatres that has survived and continues to function in its original purpose. The subsequent changes to the building reflect the changing attitudes of New Zealand society to cinema-going.

**B. Physical values: these values relate to the physical evidence present.**

**(i) Archaeological: there is potential for archaeological investigation to contribute new or important information about the human history of the district, region or nation.**

N/A

**(ii) Architectural: the place is notable for its style, design, form, scale, materials, ornamentation, period, craftsmanship or other architectural values**

The Penthouse Cinema displays a distinctive architectural style, particularly on the interior and on the front façade. The façade is largely Art Deco but with some curvature more associated with the Moderne style. Built during the pinnacle of cinematic theatre, Penthouse Theatre was built to reflect its function but also to enhance the thrill of the experience through mirroring Art Deco Hollywood glamour.



Penthouse Cinema has **significant architectural** values at least at a **regional** level and is a **fine example** of a pre-war suburban cinematic theatre.

**(iii) Townscape: the place is strongly associated with other natural or cultural features in the landscape or townscape, and/or contributes to the heritage values of a wider townscape or landscape setting, and/or it is a landmark.**

The Penthouse Cinema has **significant** townscape value. Its distinctive façade to Ohiro Road makes a significant contribution to the surrounding townscape. It stands on the edge of Brooklyn's commercial shopping centre and is seen in conjunction with other period buildings in the nearby area. The placement of a cell tower atop the structure, however, reduces its townscape values. The tower's presence also reduces the overall values to **some local significance**.

**(iv) Groups: The place is part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use.**

The Penthouse Cinema has some group value with other period buildings in the nearby area. It has a functional group coherence with other suburban cinemas in Wellington such as The Embassy and The Paramount.

**(v) Surroundings: the setting or context of the place contributes to an appreciation and understanding of its character, history and/or development.**

N/A

**(vi) Scientific: The area or place has the potential to provide scientific information about the history of the district or region**

N/A

**(vii) Technological: the place provides evidence of the history of technological development; and/or demonstrates**



***innovation or important methods of construction or design; and/or contains unusual construction materials.***

The adaptation of the Penthouse Cinema's interior into a multi-complex space provides evidence of the history of technological innovation in the movie industry. For this reason, the Cinema has **some local significance**.

***(viii) Integrity: the significant physical values of the place have been largely unmodified. This includes the retention of important modifications and/or additions from later periods.***

The Penthouse Cinema retains **significant** integrity, although it is partially modified. Its façade is a **fine example** as it retains its original configuration with the main doors to the theatre in the centre and retail spaces on either side. There are modern additions and modifications to the building which reflect the changing technologies of cinema-going in New Zealand.

***(ix) Age: the place is particularly old in the context of human occupation of the Wellington region.***

N/A

***C. Social values: these values relate to the meanings that a place has for a particular community or communities.***

***(i) Sentiment: the place has strong or special associations with a particular cultural group or community for spiritual, political, social, religious, ethnic, national, symbolic or commemorative reasons.***

The Penthouse Cinema holds special associations with the revival of independent art-house cinema in Wellington. It has also presented the same familiar face to the Brooklyn community for over eighty years. Local support for the cinema is evidenced in high audience numbers. For these reasons, the Cinema has **some local** sentiment value.

***(ii) Recognition: the place is held in high public esteem for its historic heritage values, or its contribution to the sense of***



***identity of a community, to the extent that if it was damaged or destroyed it would cause a sense of loss.***

As a visually prominent and aesthetically appealing building in the heart of Brooklyn, the Cinema holds high recognition values. The loss of the Penthouse Cinema, both in the Brooklyn community and amongst art-house cinema aficionados, would represent a **significant** loss in the **region**.

***(iii) Sense of place/ continuity: the place provides evidence of cultural or historical continuity, or contributes to a sense of place for a community***

The Penthouse Cinema and its prominent façade contribute to a sense of place and community connection as a local entertainment hub and meeting place. Penthouse Cinema is one of few suburban theatres that has survived and continues to function in its original purpose providing a sense of continuity for the Brooklyn community. Penthouse Cinema has **some social significance** at a **local** level.

***D. Tangata whenua values: the place is sacred or important to Māori for spiritual, cultural or historical reasons.***

N/A

***E. Rarity: the place is unique or rare within the district or region.***

The Penthouse Cinema is a **fine example** of a twentieth century theatre and is **rare** as one of the last few surviving suburban cinemas. As decline in audiences from the 1960s, undermined most suburban cinemas and the majority have since been demolished.

***F. Representativeness: the place is a good example of its type, era or class it represents.***

The Penthouse Cinema is a good representative of a form of public entertainment that was popular during the first half of the twentieth century. For this reason, the Cinema has **some regional** representative value.



## Recommendations

The Penthouse Cinema meets the threshold for eligibility as a Historic Heritage Building and it is recommended that the building be added to the District Plan Schedule of Historic Items. The scheduling should protect the remaining exterior historic fabric of the building, with reference to the front façade and the entrance configuration, the roof, and the north wall, all of which illustrate the original appearance of the building and are of a scale appropriate to its low-rise suburban setting. The modern alterations and additions to the south wall, and the cell tower, should be excluded from the listing. The Penthouse Cinema has **significant** historic, architectural, townscape, and social values. It is a **fine example** of a pre-war suburban cinema in Art Deco style in Wellington. It retains a **high** degree of integrity and represents an increasingly **rare** group of early twentieth century theatres in Wellington.

## Extent of the Place

The extent of place includes the land described as Pt Lot 22 DP 392, Wellington Land District, and the building known Penthouse Cinema thereon. It should encompass the building's exterior form, scale, and materials including the configuration of the entrance doors and the adjacent commercial operations.

### Non-heritage fabric / exclusions

A new floor has allowed two smaller theatres to be created within the original space of the stalls. The modern café created in the back part of the foyer and a new auditorium opening off this space means there is little evidence of the original foyer and internal form of the building. The south side is a modern enclosure for the two new cinemas that does not contribute to the qualities of the original building. These elements should be excluded from the extent.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Wellington City Council.



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# Appendices

This section includes the following appendices:

Appendix 1 Comparative analysis

Appendix 2 Wellington Thematic Heritage Study 2013

Appendix 3 Supplementary images

Appendix 4 Records(s) of title



## Appendix 1 Comparative analysis

Wellington Cinemas				
Place name	Address/ location/ NZTM	Heritage Listing or recognition of significance	Photographs	Analysis
Embassy Theatre	Courtney Place Heritage Area	Embassy Theatre, List No 7500, Category 1 <sup>50</sup>	 <p><i>Image courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org. Copyright: Russell Street - Wikimedia Commons. 10/08/2011.</i></p>  <p><i>Image courtesy of www.flickr.com. Copyright: Tom Hoyle. 11/04/2011.</i></p>	<p>The Embassy Theatre is a particularly fine early-twentieth century cinema, noted for its classical Greek Revival exterior and for the quality execution and design of its interior spaces. The 1924 purpose-built cinema has long-served Wellington’s film-going community. Its history reflects the entertainment industry’s fluctuating fortunes.</p> <p>The Penthouse Theatre was built later than the Embassy Theatre and in the Art Deco style. There are similar modifications and additions to the two theatres that show owners’ adaptability to keep up with technologies and changes within the film industry.</p>

<sup>50</sup> Heritage New Zealand, “Embassy Theatre, List No 7500, Category 1.”

<p>Paramount Theatre</p>	<p>Courtney Place Heritage Area</p>	<p>Paramount Theatre, List No 4160, Category 2<sup>51</sup></p>	 <p><i>Copyright: NZ Historic Places Trust. Photographer: Anika Klee. Date: 5/03/2009.</i></p>	<p>The Paramount Theatre is a late Edwardian theatre and the only survivor of several theatres designed by James Bennie. The façade, including the 1927 parapet, is authentic above verandah-level and contributes to the Courtenay Place Heritage Area. This is similar to Penthouse Cinema’s authenticity, although Penthouse Cinema is built in Art Deco style. It screened the first “talkie” shown in Australasia in 1929 and was used until 2017 as a venue for the Wellington Film Festival and for art-house cinema under its original name Paramount Cinema. Both the Penthouse Cinema and Paramount Theatre were run in the 1970s by the same company, reviving film festivals in Wellington.</p>
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<sup>51</sup> Heritage New Zealand, “Paramount Theatre, List No 4160, Category 2.”



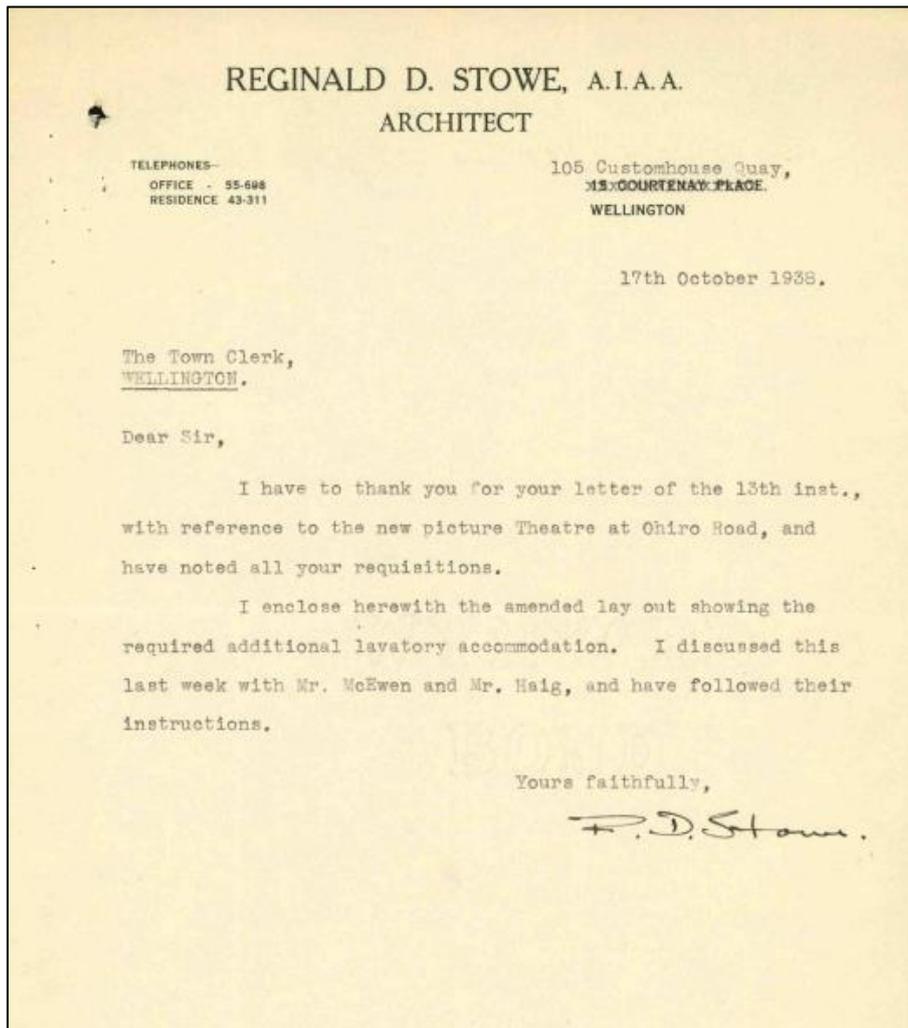
## Appendix 2 Wellington Thematic Heritage Study 2013

Refer to the Wellington Thematic Heritage Study 2013

<https://wellington.govt.nz/~media/services/community-and-culture/heritage/files/thematic-heritage-study.pdf>

	Select the themes & subthemes which apply to the place	Yes / some (add explanation)
<b>D</b>	<b>BUILDING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE</b>	
<b>D7.1</b>	<b>Socialising</b>	
D7.1G	Meeting places	A place where the community could meet and attend the cinema.
<b>D8.1</b>	<b>Public Entertainment</b>	
D8.1A	Cinema	Built as a purpose-built cinema in 1939, it was a television studio from 1963-72, the Cinema reopened in 1975 to show films as a cinema and does to this day.
<b>D9.1</b>	<b>Information providers/ media</b>	
D9.1B	Televisions stations	After film-going lost popularity with the advent of television, the theatre was modified into a television studio and used for TV advertisement production from 1963-72, after which it returned to its original use from 1975.

## Appendix 3 Supplementary images



Architect's letter to Town Clerk re amended plans of theatre, 1938, Town Clerk's file 00001\_6;1231, 205 Ohiro Road, Wellington City Council Archives.

# Appendix 4 Records of title

WN 92/47

**REGISTER**  
**NEW ZEALAND.**



Register-book, Vol. 92, folio 47

Reference: Vol. 42, folio 234  
Transfer No. 29576

**CANCELLED**  
REGISTRATION DISTRICT OF WELLINGTON

**CERTIFICATE OF TITLE UNDER LAND TRANSFER ACT.**

This Certificate, dated the Third day of December, one thousand eight hundred and ninetyand, under the hand and seal of the District Land Registrar of the Land Registration District of Wellington Witnesseth that Valdemar Gustav Magnus Nordriksen of Wellington Registrar

is seized of an estate in the simple (subject to such reservations, restrictions, encumbrances, liens, and interests as are notified by memorial underwritten or indorsed hereon; subject also to any existing right of the Crown to take and lay off roads under the provisions of any Act of the General Assembly of New Zealand) in the land hereinafter described, as the same is delineated by the plan hereon, bordered and, be the several admeasurements a little more or less, that is to say: All that parcel of land containing 24 1/2 acres two parcels and 1/2 situated and being Lot 22 on deposited plan 1879 Part 2 Section 18 of this District

 M. McQuinn  
District Land Registrar

29.

21 22 23 50

Ohio Road

Scale 2 chains to an inch

Mortgage 27720 produced 17<sup>th</sup> September 1912  
**DISCHARGED**  
Wm. Valdemar Gustav Magnus Nordriksen to The Public Trustee  
M. McQuinn R.R.

Mortgage 58163 produced 1<sup>st</sup> June 1908  
Wm. Valdemar Gustav Magnus Nordriksen to The Public Trustee  
M. McQuinn R.R.

Mortgage 80834 produced 18<sup>th</sup> April 1911  
at 3.55 pm whereby the principal sum secured by Mortgage 18833 was increased  
Mortgage 87042 produced 10<sup>th</sup> June 1912  
at 11.40 pm whereby the principal sum secured by Mortgage 18833 was increased  
Extension of term Reduction of Principal and Increase in Rate of Interest of mortgage 80834 produced 19<sup>th</sup> April 1911  
Transfer 133339 produced 15<sup>th</sup> September 1920  
at 11 am Valdemar Gustav Magnus Nordriksen to Thomas Barton of Wellington Boatmaker  
M. McQuinn R.R.

over

**CONTINUED**



# REGISTER

**DISCHARGE**

Mortgage 127187 produced 15<sup>th</sup> September 1920  
to Thomas Barton to Valdemar Gustav  
Hendrikson  
Widdowson  
Widdowson

92/147

Transfer 240139 Thomas Barton to Ernest Edward  
Columbus Rankin Theatre proprietor (2 shares)  
and Riviera Mary Louise Rankin, widow (4 shares)  
both of Wellington allotments in common in the  
shares stated produced 9<sup>th</sup> June 1921 at 2.25 pm  
Widdowson

Transmission 49904 of the interest of Beatrice Mary  
Louise Rankin deceased to Ernest Columbus Rankin  
Beatrice Marie Poprieta and Beatrice Edna Rankin  
Sisters both of Wellington as executrix entered 1<sup>st</sup>  
December 1920 at 2 pm  
Widdowson

Transfer 367461 of three 1/2 shares Ernest  
Columbus Rankin and Beatrice Marie Rankin  
to Ernest Edward Columbus Rankin of  
Wellington Theatre Proprietor  
produced 11<sup>th</sup> December 1920 at 11.55 am  
Widdowson

Transfer 504779 to Vogue Buildings Limited  
at Auckland - 23-7-1923 at 2.15 pm  
Widdowson

Mortgage 504780 to Vogue Buildings - 23-7-1923  
**DISCHARGE**  
Produced 31<sup>st</sup> 1923  
Widdowson

Mortgage 504779 to Ernest Edward Columbus  
Rankin - 23-7-1923 at 2.20 pm  
Widdowson

CERTIFICATE OF TITLE,

Vol. , folio

Mortgage 697607 to Lindley Stewart and  
Nellie Isabelle Stewart in shares of 1/2 each  
to 697608 Provisional of Lindley Stewart  
697607 and 667811 first and second mortgages  
respectively - 21.1.1924 at 10 am  
Widdowson

No 890624 the duplicate original  
of the above certificate of title having  
been lost a new Certificate of title  
has been issued this 12<sup>th</sup> day of  
November 1921 at 9 am  
C.T. 9/1/21  
Widdowson



THIS REPRODUCTION RUN A REDUCED SCALE  
CERTIFIED TO BE A TRUE COPY OF THE  
ORIGINAL REGISTER FOR THE PURPOSES OF  
SECTION 154A LAND TRANSFER ACT 1952  
Widdowson D.L.E.

