
CITY OF SOUTH PERTH LOCAL HERITAGE INVENTORY

Management
Category

A+

PLACE RECORD FORM

Prepared by *Heritage Today*, March 2000
Most recent update by City of South Perth, November 2015

Place No: CB 3 Cygnet Theatre



(*Heritage Today* 1999)

LOCATION

Name of Place	<i>Cygnet Theatre</i>
Other / former names	Como Theatre/Cinema; Grand Cygnet Cinema Como
Address	16 Preston Street
Suburb	Como
Local Government Authority	City of South Perth
Scope of listing	This heritage listing applies to the whole of the site.

LAND DESCRIPTION

Reserve No.	Lot	Location No.	Plan/Diagram	Vol/Folio
-	1, 2, 3	Swan 40	5661	V 51 F 139A

LISTINGS BY OTHER BODIES

Name of Body	Reference No.	Grade of Listing	Date
Heritage Council of Western Australia	2404	Permanent	30 June 1995
National Trust		Registered	2 May 1988
<i>Register of the National Estate</i>	<i>This register ceased to have statutory significance 19.2.2012</i>		

PERIOD	Inter-War
Design Style	Inter-War Functionalist with Art Deco influences
Construction Date	1938
Source/Details	Heritage Council of WA Assessment Report 1995.

USE(S) OF PLACE

Original	Indoor and outdoor cinemas
Present	Indoor cinema
Other / former	

HISTORICAL NOTES

The *Cygnets Theatre*, built in 1938 for James Stiles of the Grand Theatre Company, was originally named the 'Como Theatre'. It was designed by William Leighton, the well known, Inter-War architect, and built by W H Ralph and Sons. In the late 1930s, Leighton secured a reputation as a leading cinema designer for his work on several Perth cinemas, including the Piccadilly Theatre and Arcade, the Windsor Theatre in Nedlands, and the Astor Theatre in Mount Lawley. He was also behind the refurbishment of the Royal Theatre and Grand Theatre.

The Stiles family came to South Perth in the late 19th century. Arabella Stiles operated the Tea Gardens Hotel in Suburban Road, and her sons James and Arthur were involved in the early development of South Perth. James became an estate agent, and for five years was Assistant Town Clerk in the South Perth Road Board. In 1927, James built the Gaiety Theatre in Angelo Street. The following year, he and three others took over the mortgage of the Grand Theatre. Despite the Depression, the Gaiety was so successful that in 1933 James built the Hurlingham Picture Gardens.¹ These were not the first cinemas in the South Perth area – they were preceded by the picture shows held twice weekly at the Swan Street Hall (1922).

James was able to exercise a degree of economy with his picture houses, through a technique known as 'switching'. The same films were shown at the Hurlingham and Gaiety cinemas on the same night, with boys on bicycles racing between the theatres during the interval, to swap the two first feature films, ready to be shown at the other cinema as the second feature after the interval. This occasionally meant a longer-than-advertised wait between features when film canisters were lost or the cyclist had an accident.¹

By the late 1930s, South Perth had developed as a desirable and respectable riverside suburb. Como Beach was a popular recreation area for families, and a ferry service to the city left from the Como Jetty at the bottom end of Preston Street.

¹ *The Peninsula* newsletter, 5 August 1996.

HISTORICAL NOTES (cont'd)

The 1930s were also a boom period for entertainment. Attending the cinema was a popular pass-time and an escape from the worries of the Depression. A number of cinemas were built, not only in the city centres of Perth and Fremantle, but also in the suburbs. The Como Theatre (later to be renamed the *Cygnets Theatre*) was not the first cinema in the South Perth area. The Gaiety and Hurlingham Theatres were still in operation when the Como Theatre opened in 1938 as the most modern and up-to-date-cinema in the district, screening 'talkies' for the first time.

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The Como Theatre was Stiles's most advanced South Perth cinema. One mechanised 'bio box' serviced both an indoor auditorium and an outdoor picture garden. In addition, it had a proper sound system, two levels of seating, an outdoor picture garden and a 'crying room' where mothers and young children could watch the film through a glass screen. Switching continued to be practised, with films being exchanged between all three cinemas on some nights – the Como, Gaiety and Hurlingham.¹

Tram and ferry services brought people from outside the area to the new cinema.

Architecturally, the *Cygnets Theatre* reflects the style that was popular in the inter-war period, using nautical motifs such as wavy lines, smooth flat curves and tubular handrails, with an architectural emphasis on both the horizontal and vertical aspects of the building.

James Stiles died of a heart attack in 1944. The Stiles family retained ownership interests in the South Perth and Perth movie scene, with James's nephew, Arthur, after World War II.¹

The cinemas continued to prosper in the 1940s and 50s. However, business declined in the 1960s. The Gaiety closed in 1961 and the Hurlingham in 1964: The Como Theatre opened once a week except during summer when, from 1964 to 1968, it ran Festival of Perth films.

In 1968, the Theatre was renamed the 'Cygnets', to associate it with the Festival of Perth's black swan logo. With strong and increasing competition posed by the popularity of home televisions, air conditioning was installed in the Theatre in October 1968, but patronage continued to drop and the picture garden was demolished the following year. In 1981, alterations were made to the auditorium.

In 2005, the *Cygnets Theatre* received a \$4,500 heritage grant from the State Government. The Heritage Grants Scheme was designed to assist privately owned heritage buildings to be maintained. The *Cygnets Theatre* was one of 40 heritage sites to benefit from a share of the \$1 million total finding.²

In 2010, \$20 million plans for the adaptive reuse and modification of the existing *Cygnets Theatre* were investigated. The proposal, designed by Hames Sharley Architects, preserved the exiting heritage building, added four new cinemas, a gold class lounge and an outdoor auditorium, in addition to new retail, office, restaurants and other areas, including underground parking. The concept was designed to add vibrancy to the Preston Street precinct.³ The proposal did not proceed.

² *Southern Gazette* newspaper, 28 June 2005.

³ *Southern Gazette* newspaper, 14 September 2010.

HISTORICAL NOTES (cont'd)

In 2013, the *Cygnets Theatre* received a \$100,000 heritage grant from the State Government. This allowed the upgrading of wiring and fire prevention systems and the installation of a digital projector to replace the use of 35mm film reels, enabling the Theatre to remain viable.⁴

DESCRIPTION

The *Cygnets Theatre* is located in a prominent, elevated location in Preston Street, with views to the Swan River. The two-storey cinema originally had an adjacent outdoor picture garden. The imposing tower on the front of the building, inscribed with the name *Como Theatre*, was clearly visible from the Como Jetty at the bottom of Preston Street.

The plan and structure of the building are similar to that of the Windsor Theatre in Nedlands, which was also designed by William Leighton. Similarities include the streamlined contours of the form of the cinemas, the combination of indoor cinema and outdoor picture garden and contemporary decorative motifs.

The *Cygnets Theatre* is an example of the Inter-War Functionalist style. Characteristics of this style are the asymmetrical massing of smooth geometric elements, and emphasis on exterior form reflecting internal function.

The centrally located tower originally marked the main entrance at ground level. It also housed a 'bio box' on the upper level. The bio-box was designed to allow the projector to be rolled to a different position, which enabled it to service either the indoor auditorium or the outdoor picture garden. This was unique at the time. Film canisters were hauled up to the bio box balcony from the street. The bio-box extends out from the tower in a fashionable streamlined curve and features a cantilevered balcony with steel railings, resembling the form of an ocean liner. The 'liner' theme is reinforced by the three 'port hole' windows on the exterior of the building. The stylistic influence of Le Corbusier, a functional Modernist architect, is evident in these forms and detail.

A shop, which projects from the western side of the building, creates a small entry court in front of the cinema. The horizontal awning over the shop front is carried around the front of the cinema. The original entrance to the theatre was at the base of the tower, emphasized by a pair of large doors flanked by planter boxes, but the entrance and foyer were rearranged in 1964. In the foyer, two ticket offices were located on the eastern side of the entrance. The entrance to the auditorium was defined by a few steps leading up into the auditorium, while the entrance to the picture garden was through a set of four doors slightly to the east of the main entrance.

The interior of the *Cygnets Theatre* is relatively plain, in keeping with the functionalist style. The auditorium, which includes a dress circle, can accommodate 712 people. The nautical theme extends to the interior of the auditorium. The 'crying room' at the rear of the auditorium was screened off by glass. This room was converted into the manager's office in 1969. The curved upstairs lounge area was at the top of a jarrah-lined stairwell.

In 1964, the ticket box serving the outdoor picture garden was converted to serve both the indoor and outdoor theatres, and the second ticket box was converted into a sweets counter (profits from which soon outstripped the profit from ticket sales).

Further alterations were made to the arrangement of seating in the auditorium in 1981.

⁴ *The West Australian* newspaper, 5 December 2013.

DESCRIPTION (cont'd)

As a result of the City modifying the street kerbing and pavement, the old shop awning of the *Cygnets Theatre* was damaged by large vehicles. In 1994, the awning was repaired, and measures taken to prevent drivers of large vehicles from parking under the awning.⁵

ASSOCIATIONS**ASSOCIATION TYPE**

James Stiles and later Stiles family members	Cinema pioneer
William Leighton	Well known Inter-War architect
W H Ralph and Sons	Builders

HISTORIC THEME / Sub-theme**CATEGORIES OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Community Efforts/ <i>Sport, recreation and entertainment</i>	Aesthetic
	Historic
	Social
	Representative
	Rarity

RATING AND ASSESSMENT**High****Low**

	1	2	3	4	5
Aesthetic value (streetscape, setting)	1 ✓	2	3	4	5
Architectural merit (design features)	1 ✓	2	3	4	5
Rarity value	1 ✓	2	3	4	5
Value as part of a group/precinct	1	2 ✓	3	4	5
Condition	1	2 ✓	3	4	5
Integrity	1	2 ✓	3	4	5

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The *Cygnets Theatre* has aesthetic, historic, social, rarity and representative cultural heritage significance. The building is a fine example of the Inter-War Functionalist style as practised by architect, William Leighton. It demonstrates the new functional approach to cinema design in the late 1930s, combining projection facilities for both the indoor and outdoor theatres. The *Cygnets Theatre* is one of the many cinemas built in Perth and the suburbs in the Inter-War period, reflecting the popularity of cinema entertainment in the 1930s. This popularity waned in the 1960s following the introduction of television. The *Cygnets Theatre* has rarity value as the least altered of the 1930s suburban cinemas of Perth still in operation. The recent trend of building cinema complexes has challenged the financial survival of suburban cinemas such as the *Cygnets Theatre*.

⁵ Register of the National Estate Database – Place Report, 1996.

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Management Category A+ : Exceptional significance – Registered

Conservation essential. Essential to the heritage of the locality. Rare or outstanding example. Registered by the Heritage Council of Western Australia. Demolition or significant alteration to a place in Management Category A+ of the Heritage List is not permitted. Any alterations or additions are to be guided by a Conservation Plan, if any, and reinforce the heritage values of the place.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION / BIBLIOGRAPHY

- City of South Perth Municipal Heritage Inventory (No. 1) 1994.
- Reviews of Municipal Heritage Inventory by *Heritage Today* in 2000 and 2006.
- Heritage Council of WA Assessment, 1994.
- Register of the National Estate Database – Place Report, 1996.
- Various newspaper articles, as identified throughout.

HISTORY OF HERITAGE LISTING BY CITY OF SOUTH PERTH

	Date Adopted by Council
Town Planning Scheme No. 5 – Schedule G	Gazetted 25 September 1986
Initial listing in MHI	December 1994
Update of MHI	February 1996
Update of MHI	December 1996
Update of MHI	December 1997
Review of MHI by <i>Heritage Today</i>	June 2000
Update of MHI	June 2002
Update of MHI	March 2003
Review of MHI by <i>Heritage Today</i>	February 2006
Interim Heritage List – Policy P313 ‘Local Heritage Listing’	April 2013
Updated in renamed LHI	November 2015



Cygnet Theatre, 1994
(Picture South Perth Photograph Collection)



Cygnet Theatre, 1994
(Picture South Perth Photograph Collection)

LOCATION MAP



(Digital Cadastral Data supplied by Landgate, WA. P295)