

The Regent Theatre

57-71 Broadway Avenue, Palmerston North

NZHPT Registration Number: 5104
NZHPT Registration Type: Historic Place – Category I
NZHPT Registration Date: 16/11/89
City/District Council: Palmerston North City Council
District Plan Status: Category 1



Brief History

Built in 1930, Palmerston North's Regent Theatre is one of the few remaining intact examples of a chain of 'Regent' theatres built in New Zealand and Australia by successful Australia-based theatre company J C Williamson Ltd. The first Regent theatre, the Auckland Regent, opened in 1926, and by 1934 the company had built 23 theatres throughout New Zealand. The reinforced concrete design is the work of Melbourne architect Charles Hollinshed who with business partner A H Walkely specialized in theatre and cinema design and was J C Williamson's principal architect. The three storey concrete façade is a good example of the 'moderne' or early art deco style with its 'symmetry, vertical fins, shallow stylized relief, stepped skyline, and chevron ornament' (Bowman & Kelly, 1993).

In contrast to the exterior, the elaborate interior took its inspiration from the 'picture palace' era of the 1920s and 1930s and displays a mix of styles from Baroque to Persian to neo-Classical.

Features of the interior include the vaulted marble staircase, the kowhaiwhai design on the mezzanine ceiling, and the large fresco in the auditorium, which is the largest surviving work of noted Australian scenic artist W Colman, who worked as the chief artist and designer for J C Williamson. The theatre was designed for the dual purpose of presenting both live performances and 'talkie' films and its acoustics were considered world class at the time of its opening.

The Depression led J C Williamson into financial difficulties and in 1946 the firm was taken over by New Zealander, Sir Robert Kerridge, who by 1949 owned 111 theatres throughout the country. From the 1960s, the advent of television and the extension of licensing hours caused a drop in cinema attendance. The Regent Theatre, like many other large single screen cinemas, became dilapidated and run down. This upside of this neglect is that the building was never modernized, and is a rare authentic example of 1930s Regent Theatres that were once common in New Zealand, most of which have been demolished or have been converted for alternative use.

Film distribution company Pacer-Kerridge took over the Kerridge empire in the 1980s but soon saw their fortunes fall in the sharemarket crash of 1987 and in 1988 the Palmerston North Regent Theatre was put up for sale. A year later, a community campaign was launched by the Regent Action Group, supported by the Manawatu Regional Committee of the Historic Places Trust and community group, the Friends of the Regent, to 'Save the Regent'. A petition to save the building gained 6,500 signatures and in October 1993 the Palmerston North City Council purchased the building for future use as the city's main auditorium. Pressure from the public and the various groups involved resulted in the Council going ahead with a major upgrade and restoration of the building, carried out between 1996 and 1998. The final total cost of the work was \$13.13 million of which \$1.7 million was raised by the community and \$1 million was generously provided by the New Zealand Lotteries Grants Board. An award, displayed in the foyer, was presented to the Council by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust 'for exemplary preservation of the Regent Theatre and commendable leadership in work to preserve a historic place'.

Principal Sources:

Bowman, I & Kelly, M, *Palmerston North CBD Heritage Inventory*. Palmerston North, Palmerston North City Council, 2003.

NZHPT File, Regent Theatre, Palmerston North, 12008-007

Proposal for Classification: Regent Theatre. NZHPT, 1989

Palmerston North City Library Photograph Collection T21, 25, St73.