CHAPTER 1

"A PLETHORA OF THRESHOLDS" - CREATING A SENSE OF OCCASION

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"A PLETHORA OF THRESHOLDS"[1]
- CREATING A SENSE OF OCCASION

The history of any building is closely tied to the history of the people who dwelt in or used it. The picture theatre is no exception to this. While some architectural and social research (the latter to a much lesser extent) has been undertaken on Australian city and suburban picture theatres, next to nothing has been recorded about their 'country cousins'. The history of the Australian country picture theatre is, by and large, unknown. No major research has been undertaken that combines these three aspects of our social history and heritage. As those born in the 1920s and 1930s continue to pass away and the physical evidence of picture theatres continues to disappear, the void in our knowledge of why people attended and what it was like going to the pictures in pre-television rural Australia will grow wider. This thesis will help to redress, to some extent, the situation by, firstly, presenting a chronological history of the buildings used for pictures within a selected country area of New South Wales (therein tracing the development of cinema exhibition in that area) and, secondly, recording the relevance to and the importance of the buildings in pre-television days to the people of that area. The subject area may be considered to be representative of the state as a whole. What specific influences, if any, the films themselves had on the lives of people (for example what overseas' slang infiltrated our language, how fashions changed, which hairstyles were copied) has not been essayed as it is part of a broader sociological topic[2] not considered relevant for the purpose of this thesis.

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[1] The phrase ("A Plethora of Thresholds") has been taken from W.D. Routt, "The Glass House - Film and Architecture. Part 1", Filmviews, Vol. 33, No. 137, Spring 1988, pp. 32 - 35.

[2] Such a topic might include the effect of moving pictures, records, wireless, books, magazines on the lifestyle of Australians, as well as political and economic influences.

Prior to the early 1960s, Australians went in their millions to the pictures and the nation, in particular New South Wales, was well-endowed with picture theatre buildings. (See Appendices A - D.) It cannot be denied that, from the beginning, *"The sole purpose of theatre operation is to make money."*[3] Picture exhibition (to mass audiences) commenced in Australia in 1896 and it was seen as a money-making opportunity. That was why, in the late nineteenth century, travelling picture show men gathered together a portable projector, several thousand feet of highly inflammable nitrate film (the subjects of which bore little resemblance to each other), possibly an Edison gramophone, some of the 'latest' sheet music and headed off into the country areas of our nation, travelling thousands of miles (by train) and screening in country towns for one to three nights. Travellers in the early twentieth century did much the same although some preferred a horse and cart in which to travel. From c1910, as purpose-built or permanent venues[4] became the norm, exhibitors were faced with having continually to attract patrons, rather than allow, what had been in the past, the novelty of an infrequent visit to 'do the trick' for them. Thus, they turned to and drew upon the traditions of the music hall/vaudeville, sideshow and theatrical entrepreneurs and attempted to entice people inside by means of 'showy' facades and pretentious advertising displays. During those formative years (c1910 - mid-1920s), exhibitors in city, suburbs and country areas acquired the knowledge of how to attract patrons to their shows and this involved them continually having to improve their venues (including equipment) in order to maintain profits.[5] On the other side of the picture (figuratively speaking) were the patrons who, in the early

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[3] F. H. Ricketson, Jnr., The Management of Motion Picture Theatres. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co. Inc., 1938, p. 6

[4] For example, utilising a local hall (such as a School of Arts) on a permanent basis.

[5] The Sydney city exhibitors were constantly faced with having to improve their theatres. While the first 'wave' were built in the years around 1910 - 1912, it was not long after World War

years probably went to see the flickering images simply because they were a novelty. As time passed and they were able to attend on a more regular basis, because either a touring show man came regularly or a permanent picture theatre was erected in the town, it seems that the patrons went because it was a social event. The whole business of going to the pictures had developed into a sense of occasion and people, being 'social animals', readily attended regardless of what was on the screen.[6] By the mid-1920s, the picture business had grown far beyond what the early travellers could have envisaged.

There were many live theatrical companies touring the countryside in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as permanent live theatres in Sydney and Newcastle.[7] Live theatre had a strong tradition in Australia. So, what was it that made picture theatres different to live theatres? According to one American researcher, there were psychological differences.

> *In the movie theatre, ticket buyers take with them only a mood and a memory, which is reinforced by the physical surroundings. In live theatre, the audience and actors interact,*

I that, in order to stay ahead of competitors, theatre owners were remodelling. It was, in fact this expenditure that forced Union Theatres into liquidation in 1931 and the sale of Hoyts Theatres to an American company in the early 1930s. A perusal of individual theatres in R. Thorne's Cinemas of Australia via U.S.A. Sydney: Architecture Dept. University of Sydney, 1981 will supply information about rebuilding. One example worth nothing was the Lyric in George Street. It was opened in 1911, extensively redecorated into a latticed psuedo- extravaganza in the early 1920s to become the Lyric Wintergarden, then in the early 1930s transformed into an Art Deco theatre which it remained until entirely remodelled in the 1960s.

[6] D. Höher, "The Composition of Music Hall Audiences 1850 - 1900" in Bailey, P. (ed.). Music Hall. The Business of Pleasure. U.K.: Open University Press, 1986, pp. 73-93. In nineteenth century England, music hall visits were looked upon as *"social events: people tended to go there in groups, if not with workmates, then with neighbours or members of the family."* (p.80) The results in Chapter 5 of this thesis confirm that going to the pictures was also a social event.

[7] R. Waterhouse, From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville. Sydney: N.S.W. University Press, 1990, p.85. *"From the gold rush period onwards the major touring companies had always included country towns on their itinerary..."*

feeding off each other and creating a new experience each time. But in a movie theatre, the film is always the same. The experience of moviegoing is shaped by interaction among members of the audience and by the environment itself.[8]

Besides the psychological differences, pictures were available to all classes of society even if there was a perception that the upper class preferred live theatre and regarded the pictures *"as a form of cheap popular entertainment, similar to the circus, and without the artistic potential of the theatre"*[9]. The masses found that picture shows offered them reasonable surroundings, a social experience in a relatively convivial atmosphere and glimpses of the world that they had hitherto been denied, all for a very small admission price.[10] In the early days of this century, the films themselves were known as 'photoplays', the film makers and exhibitors obviously attempting to legitimise their product. As the number of picture theatres grew in Australia, exhibitors continually sought ways to improve their venues in order to maintain or increase business. Thus, an accidental duality of purpose occurred: the exhibitors, because of their desire to make money, improved their venues and presentations; the patrons, desirous of being entertained and, to a far greater extent,

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[8] M. Valentine. The Show Starts on the Sidewalk. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, p. 4.

[9] R. Megaw, "American Image Influence on Australian Cinema Management" in Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Vol. 54, June 1968, pp. 194 - 204.

[10] A comparison of admission prices between live theatres and picture theatres for the years between c1910 and c1929 reveals that pictures were accessible for as little as one shilling (adults) whereas live theatres charged higher prices. For example, Sydney's The Sunday Sun, 29.5.1910 p.2 advertised William Anderson's London Vaudeville Stars at the Standard Theatre with prices at three shillings, two shillings and one shilling, and Miss Sylvia Blackston and other *"leading artists"* at the YMCA Hall at five shillings, three shillings and two shillings. On the same page, the Empire Picture Palace, Oxford Street, advertised the latest in *"cinematographic art"* for one shilling or sixpence, and West's Pictures at the Palace Theatre advertised seats from sixpence to two shillings. With the advent of 'talkies' from the late 1920s, the live theatres experienced a rapid decline. This decline was not reversed to any great extent until after World War II.

wishing to engage in a social experience, patronised the venues. Hence, both parties, desirous of 'being fulfilled', were fulfilled.[11]

At this juncture, it is worth exploring just what a picture theatre was considered to be, both abroad and at home. Writing in the 1980s, William D Routt[12] stated that any film seen was seen in a physical structure called a 'cinema'. The 'architectural cinema' was, he claimed, *"a series of thresholds designed to encourage the translation of people from outside to inside"*, and he explained this by a pseudo-flow diagram of pavement to vestibule, vestibule to ticket box, ticket box to stair, stair to auditorium entrance, auditorium entrance to seat. When one examines the anatomy of a cinema building, it is, as Routt suggested, a place *"all outside"* - *"facing away from its interior"*. There can be no half way in or out despite its *"plethora of thresholds"*. He further stated that, from a semiotic viewpoint, a cinema was a *"public space"* for *"private activity"*. Outside or inside, public or private, these *"poles"* (as he called them) may be separated in the architecture of the cinema but both are indispensable. Cinema audiences must come eventually to focus on the screen and the screen on the individual. As Routt saw it, the 1920s provided a cinema architecture that he labelled *"fairyland"* - *"a public expression of collective dreaming"*. (One is tempted to include in this description cinema architecture from c1910 to the 1940s.) Routt lamented that, at the time of his writing, there was nothing of *"architectural excitement in the cinema"*, the exterior (outside) simply being *"a screen to house its screens."*[13] He pointed out that

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[11] Chapter 4 (through the tracing of the history of exhibition within the subject area) and Chapter 5 (the qualitative research data) expand upon this idea.

[12] W.D. Routt, op. cit., pp. 32 - 35.

[13] If one were to visit cinema complexes of the late 1980s/1990s, one would find the auditoria to be far less decorated than in pre-television times and patrons are not encouraged to spend time inside them since single feature shows are the norm. In some cinema complex vestibules, seats are not provided as the management wishes to discourage people from loitering

we do not know if *"the space on the screen moves out among the people...or whether people are moved out of their seats and onto the screen"*. There is a certain amount of what he termed *"displacement"* and that films were *"the agents of that displacement"*. Therefore, as Routt explained, a person's *"experience of space in films is not the same as one's experience of space in the architectural cinema where one is sitting."* Over the years, the concept of *"in the film"* had replaced the idea of *"in the cinema"*, and thereby reduced the level of importance of the experience of space in the architectural cinema. For many people, the sense of occasion had been greatly lessened and going to the pictures (ie the cinema) had long been replaced with going to see a film.

Overseas theatres, architects and their philosophies about environmental psychology have been better recorded than Australian ones. (This is to be expected as there are large markets for books in the United Kingdom and the United States of America and more willing researchers.[14]) What these overseas people have to say is relevant to the Australian scene. David Atwell, English theatre historian, is one of the better known writers in this field. In his Cathedrals of the Movies, he traced the development of the British picture theatre, paying particular attention to the architects. Frank Verity (English), whose theatre work spanned Edwardian times into the 1920s, was acknowledged by the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1937 with the following, *"...Mr. Verity's more sumptuous cinemas are examples of such high architectural accomplishment that anyone is to be pitied who cannot enjoy them for their own sake."*[15] Another mentioned was John Eberson, an

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(eg Hurstville GU Cinemas).

[14] The theatre historical societies in these countries run into the many hundreds, unlike Autralia that has a little over two hundred societies.

[15] D. Atwell, Cathedrals of the Movies, London: Architectural Press Ltd., 1980, p. 57.

American architect, renowned for his atmospheric theatres[16], and whose work was well-known in Australia and the UK. He was quoted from 1927 as having said, *"We visualise and dream a magnificent amphitheatre under a glorious moonlit sky in an Italian garden, in a Persian court, in a Spanish patio, or in a mystic Egyptian temple-yard, all canopied by a soft moonlit sky...We credit the deep azure blue of the Mediterranean sky with a therapeutic value, soothing the nerves and calming perturbing thoughts."*[17] A third, Theodore Komisarjevsky, had a background as a director of the Imperial Theatre, Moscow. As a stage producer, he had a great influence on acting, settings and lighting, before he took up theatre design. Expressing some of his thoughts about designing, he wrote,

> *The richly decorated theatre, the comfort with which they* [the public] *are surrounded, the efficiency of the service contribute to an atmosphere and a sense of well-being of which the majority have hitherto only imagined...in comfortable seats and amidst attractive and appealing surroundings.*[18]

In an interview for an American theatre magazine in 1926, John Eberson spoke at length about the need for picture theatres to be places where patrons felt that, by attending them, they were experiencing a sense of occasion. He explained the need for variety in the buildings. Believing that people love variety when it comes to amusement, he said that the masses *"might not know art, but they feel it..."*. A picture theatre, *"more than any other building, requires sensational features -*

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[16] Atmospheric theatres were those where the ceiling was made to look like the sky and patrons were given the impression that they were sitting 'outside'. The sky usually had 'stars'.

[17] D. Atwell, op.cit., pp. 76-77.

[18] ibid., p. 130. Komisajevsky's most well-known interiors were in the Granada Theatres at Tooting (1931) and Woolwich (1937) both of which (as at 1980) have been statutorily listed by the Dept. of Environment, U.K..

it must have modern features - it must be something 'Never Before'..." Eberson knew what he wanted to achieve and what the patrons and the exhibitors expected. (Australia gained five of his style of theatres, four from Eberson's designs and one that 'borrowed' his ideas.[19]) In the late 1940s, Eberson was interviewed by another film trade journal in which he reminisced about theatre design of earlier years. While design styles had changed, the basic tenets had not.

> *In tune with the times and the average standard of living, great stress was laid on patron comfort and all equipment relating to it. More comfortable seats, better sight lines, better acoustics and sound, and real luxury in rest rooms, lounges and toilets - rather than ornately decorated interiors - were the Eberson aim.*[20]

Eberson mentioned that the average standard of living had changed since he had designed theatres in the 1920s. Whether this was so for some or all, times certainly had changed. The Great Depression had occurred. Fashion and design had changed. Furnishings and housing comforts had improved for those fortunate to have the money to purchase them. Picture exhibitors had to keep up with the times and the perceived expectations of their patrons. It has been claimed that the 1930s cinema *"...belonged to the proletariate"* and was *"the ultimate in consumer architecture".*[21] Film set designers were keeping up with latest trends and cinemas could not afford to remain old-fashioned. In Australia, this was especially evident in the theatres designed by Guy Crick and

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[19] "The Atmospheric Theatre - An Interview With John Eberson, Architect", in Motion Picture News (Better Theatres Section), U.S.A., 30.11.1926, no pagination. The five atmospheric theatres in Australia were Sydney Capitol, Melbourne State, Perth Ambassadors, Goulburn Empire, Paddington (Qld) Plaza.

[20] "John Eberson", in Theatre Catalog, U.S.A. 1948/49, pp. 2 - 22.

[21] L & M. Stapleton, "C. Bruce Dellit 1900-1942 and Emil Sodersten 1901-1961", p. 127 in H. Tanner (ed.), Architects of Australia. South Melbourne: The Macmillan Book Company of Australia Pty. Ltd., 1981.

Bruce Furse ('in association').

Modernity was not confined solely to picture theatres as a browse through architectural magazines of the 1930s shows. The 1930s saw many impressive picture theatres built, all endeavouring to continue the tradition of the sense of occasion and all emulating the current vogues. Australian researcher, Diane Collins, suggested that the 1930s picture theatres, by using carpet in foyers, tried *"to resemble the family sitting room or the lounge of a better type of residential hotel"*. She stated that the 1930s reversed the development of the exotic, aristocratic world of the palatial theatres by making the cinema patron *"a relaxed participant in a building which imitated his own domestic surroundings."*[22] It cannot be denied that exhibitors wanted their patrons to be relaxed. But Collins has ignored the fact that, for many, wall-to-wall carpets were a luxury in the 1930s[23] (most people being satisfied with a carpet square or some Feltex or a hall runner, if they could afford it) and the plush theatre vestibules and foyers were hardly 'typical' of the *"domestic surroundings"* in houses throughout Australia. The purpose of the wall-to-wall carpet, the modern furniture and light fittings (prismatic, concealed or otherwise), plush lounges, etc was to give most patrons something more than what they had in their own homes. These little(?) touches of elegance took 'Mr and Mrs Stringbag'[24] out of their normal, mundane environment and, for a relatively inexpensive charge (a

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[22] D. Collins, Cinema and Society in Australia 1920-39. Ph.D. Thesis (unpublished), University of Sydney, 1975, p. 405. Collins used J.M. Freeland, Architecture in Australia, Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1968, pp. 257-259 as a source for these statements. Freeland offers an incorrect and superficial view of 1930s films and the effects, he claims, they had on cinema design. *"The shadow world on the screen had its own equally unreal settings. Because the stories were invariably set in night clubs and sumptuous penthouses the designs produced* [ie for the film] *were essentially interior. The same glamorous character was repeated in the cinemas in which the films were shown. "* (page 259) There is no referencing in Freeland's work.

[23] P. Cuffey, Australian Houses of the '20s & '30s. Fitzroy, Vic.: The Five Mile Press, 1989, pp. 201-204 "Floorcoverings".

[24] A colloquial phrase for the average couple.

shilling or two) gave them the opportunity to experience that which they probably would not have been able to afford for their own homes. Added to all that were several hours of entertainment in a social atmosphere. Collins' comments rather fatuously deny the sense of occasion being created for patrons by the architects and exhibitors in their 1930s cinemas. They may not all have been State and Regent Theatres[25], but they certainly did not *"imitate"* one's *"domestic surroundings"*.[26]

It was not until living standards increased dramatically after World War II that picture theatre exhibitors had trouble trying to keep ahead of the norm, finding it harder and harder to give the patrons the sense of occasion. It was only then that most of their patrons' domestic surroundings were as good as, if not better than, those offered by the picture theatres.[27] It was then that other gimmicks were employed (eg 3-D[28], CinemaScope screen formats not available in the home). In a later work[29] that stemmed from her 1975 thesis, Collins still made no attempt to discover why people patronised picture shows. *"The psychology of the movies' audiences eludes us still"*, she claimed, then offered a few suggestions as to why they might have attended - *"...a particular film"*, *"...a little enjoyable escapism"*, *"...to kill a few hours"*, *"...to entertain some guests"*. In an

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[25] The State and Regent theatres in Sydney were true picture palaces, dating from the latter half of the 1920s.

[26] In the research undertaken, the writer has yet to come across a cinema, the style of which could be described as "Happy Valley", although one or two country halls come close to it..

[27] Perhaps that is why today we look upon the State Theatre in Sydney as worthy of preservation but have ignored theatre buildings of later periods that, on the surface, appear to be far less decorated. Thus, we show our ignorance of the historical nature of these buildings.

[28] A form of 3-D (ie three dimension) picture was trialled in the 1930s. Its full potential was not achieved until the early 1950s when feature films were made in the medium. It was quickly superseded by CinemaScope.

[29] D. Collins, Hollywood Down Under. Australians at the Movies: 1896 to the Present Day. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1987, p. 34.

attempt to brush the whole issue aside, she concluded that *"Each person had private reasons for being there that resist near categorisation."* What she has failed to consider were the psychology of place and the social aspect of 'going to the pictures', both of which played important parts in the total event.[30]

Overseas' designs influenced Australian architects' work and this was most certainly the case with regards to picture theatres.[31] The creation of a building that espoused a sense of occasion would have been to the forefront of the designers' minds. Kaberry and Chard (Sydney-based architects whose work spread throughout the 1920s and 1930s) and Crick and Furse (Sydney-based architects of the 1930s-1950s[32]) were well-respected in theatre design and were responsible for hundreds of picture theatres (either new or remodelled) across the nation. It is fortunate that a few interviews were recorded. Sadly, like most of Australia's theatre architects, their records have been 'lost' and their work has been either destroyed or badly mutilated. However, some of their thoughts have been recorded in a few of the old film trade journals.[33] In 1923, Kaberry and Chard were

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[30] Both of these aspects emerged during the course of the oral histories and correspondence (undertaken for part of this thesis) and were considered to be very important by the participants.

[31] Australian architects, like their overseas' counterparts, would have looked through architectural magazines, seeking new ideas. Perhaps because of our remoteness from Europe and USA, the ideas took a little more time to filter through. One such USA magazine was called Pencil Points. According to one of Crick and Furse's employees from the 1930s, it was well-known in their office.

[32] Although the partnership broke-up in 1940, both men continued to practise separately. The bulk of their theatre work was done in the 1930s.

[33] Film trade journals were magazines expressly created for cinema industry people, including exhibitors. Besides containing information about events within the film industry - both in Australia and abroad - and the latest film releases, they also contained information about what exhibitors were doing and, from time to time, helpful hints on mechanical and design aspects of theatre operation. They commenced in the early years of cinema exhibition and continued until the 1980s. Some of the titles were: Film Weekly; Everyones; Australasian Exhibitor; Exhibitor; Australasian Cinema. Various public libraries have certain holdings.

reported as saying,

> *The designing of a modern theatre is indeed an art, and the result of attempts by the amateur are everywhere in evidence to the long-suffering public in impossible vision lines, conspicuous absence of ventilation, and other all-important matters of design that should ensure the comfort of the patron and success to the management generally...After all the details of construction have been completed...there comes the question of decoration or interior treatment...*[it] *is a matter of individual taste either of the designer or the owner; but undoubtedly in a building for entertainment and amusement, light and cheerful colour schemes are essential and preferable to dull - though wonderfully artistic - tones.*[34]

In another interview thirteen years later, their comments were not much different and they still insisted that the picture theatre had to be a place that suggested a sense of occasion for each patron. While predicting the intrusion of television into our lives, they maintained that the picture theatre was, and would remain, both a place of meeting and a place of entertainment.

> *The showman is apt to exaggerate the importance of striking novelty in both front elevation and interior treatment; for the former is useful, even necessary, in the city to make a theatre discernible amongst its competitors, while in the suburb every child knows the location of a new home of amusement. Hence, a well-designed facade is even more necessary in a suburb, as it shows to greater advantage among its neighbours and is subject to more attention...The best decoration for an auditorium is the one an audience can view with a feeling of exhilaration, and yet behold repeatedly without boredom. This*

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[34] Interview with Kaberry and Chard, Everyones, Sydney, 9.5.1923, p.91.

means brightness (in keeping with the idea of relaxation), harmony and proportion and absence of eventually irritating features that move or change...great satisfaction [seeing] *the creation of something new, and despite the fact that we shall soon tune-in and have our picture thrown on the dining-room wall from some central exchange, the community spirit will prevail and demand the theatre beautiful as a place of meeting and entertainment.*[35]

The work of Guy Crick and Bruce Furse in the 1930s was unmistakable.[36] Using 'Modern' architectural and decorating elements, their theatre buildings (typified in Sydney by the Kings' chain of cinemas) brought their architectural firm many commissions throughout Australia. Theirs was the spirit of the time - all that was modern. In 1936 Crick was interviewed and said,

...the architect's part goes considerably further than the mere design of the theatre. That aspect, of course, is important but no more than the furnishing, lighting, decoration and the general treatment necessary to make an attractive show-house. All things must harmonise for tone to obtain maximum effect, and...it is a work for the architect.[37]

In a later journal, he stated,

Everything in the interior of the modern theatre should play its part in obtaining a harmonious whole; this includes wall treatments, decorative motifs, doors, carpets, furnishings, upholstery, and even such things as the dressing of the theatre with vases

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[35] Interview with Kaberry and Chard, Architecture, Sydney, 1.6.1936, pp. 150-1.

[36] Australasian Exhibitor, 7.11.1940, Sydney. p.5. Short item about Bruce Furse. The Crick and Furse partnership commenced in the early 1930s and ended in 1940.

[37] Interview with Guy Crick, Everyones, Sydney, 16.12.1936, p. 42.

and flowers.[38]

The picture theatre was much more than bricks, mortar, steel and seats. A sense of occasion became closely linked with going to the pictures and a sense of place became associated with the building within its community. Collins made the point, *"The phenomenon of the moving picture house is of major importance to the historian of the cinema. The picture theatre represented the most concrete and permanent product of the motion picture industry."*[39] In writing this, whether she fully appreciated the point or not, she declared the importance of the building to the process of 'going to the pictures'. The 'product' (the building) is the place where, according to Marvin Carlson[40], *"the experience of the audience assembled to share in the creation of the total event"* takes place. Traditionally, people have viewed theatre buildings this way. The entire building's component parts, including its locality, *"are all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning of its experience"*. Semiotics, he claimed, can help one's understanding of the complete theatrical experience, and not solely the text of the play being seen (or, by implication, the film). Thus, the theatre building, long regarded as a *"utilitarian public building"*, can be looked at from a very different way if one approaches it from the semiotic viewpoint. Carlson wrote purely about 'live' theatre buildings.[41] He said that theatres attract the public by

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[38] Interview with Guy Crick, "Theatre Architecture and Allied Trades and Services", Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory 1940/41, pp. 61-62, as cited by R.H. Thorne, Cinemas of Australia via U.S.A., Sydney: Architecture Department, University of Sydney, 1981, p.57.

[39] D. Collins, op. cit. 1975, p. 383. It is worth noting at this point that while they may have been *"the most concrete and permanent product of the motion picture industry"*, for the most they have disappeared within Australia since the advent of television.

[40] M. Carlson, Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture. Cornell University Press, U.S.A., 2nd printing, 1992, p.2.

[41] Letter from M. Carlson, The Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York, U.S.A. in reply dated 10.3.1994 to letter from the writer in which he

offering performances and the opportunity to spend time in attractive surroundings. By implication, the same can be said for the picture theatres of pre-television days. One only has to recall Routt, with his *"plethora of thresholds"* and the *"architectural excitement in the cinema"*, and what Carlson had to say can apply equally to cinema buildings.

> *A semiotic approach to theatre architecture should encourage us to look not only at the traditional elements of stage and auditorium but at every distinct element of the theatre complex for what it may reveal about the meanings of this building for its society...since the meaning of those elements that make up a theatre structure, and sometimes the elements themselves, will change as the society that interprets them changes.*[42]

If we view going to the pictures from this semiotic viewpoint, then there is more to the event than first meets the eye. For example, the theatre building's location could be important, or as Carlson pointed out, *"where it's not"*. A theatre may have been built in an important commercial part of town to capitalise on the 'busyness' of the area.[43] For example, in the subject area, the Broadway

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wrote *"...I have not myself done any work on that theatre tradition."* (ie picture theatres)

[42] M. Carlson, op. cit., p. 9. As times and attitudes change, a building may fall into disrepute because of its locality or because it is unable to provide the service for which it was originally intended. The Sydney Capitol Theatre is a good example. It is situated in the Haymarket area that, for many years, was considered to be a 'seedy' part of town. As a cinema, it was too large to survive and its limited stage facilities excluded it from major stage shows. After restorations and extensions, its reopening in 1995 should create a better image for the area.

[43] The location, considered important by exhibitors in the past, worked against the picture theatres in post-television years, especially in the city centre and the suburbs of major capital cities. The building site became more valuable than the cinema building that stood on it. Examples of this are numerous and include Sydney's Prince Edward, Ashfield Kings, Blacktown Warrick, Manly Odeon, Chatswood Kings, to name a few. The cinema operations themselves were capable of being sustained but the property owners gained more money from the sale of the properties. Country locations were not affected in the same way nor to such a large extent.

Theatre at Parkes was built in 1923-25 at the newer commercial end of the town. Some theatres became important urban landmarks. Their locations would *"condition the public image of the building"*.[44] Maggie Valentine expanded Carlson's idea when she wrote about the subsequent loss of 'community' associated with modern cinemas and multiplexes with their 'airport-like' appearances.

> *One of the most important qualities provided by the motion picture theatre, but missing in the multiplex or in home video rental, was the sense of community. Theatre provided the 'lobby experience': everyone there was sharing the moment. They were watching the same movie at the same time and breaking for intermission at the same point...The sharing of joy and sorrows* [associated with the film] *added to and was reinforced by the grandeur of the space.*[45]

Earlier in her work, Valentine expressed concern at the way

> *Most historians and critics have overlooked the significant contribution of the theatre environment in social, film and architectural history. Film historians have tended to focus on the history of the industry - namely, the economic and substantive development of film production - describing the exhibition process only in vague or generalized terms.*[46]

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[44] An example of this in Sydney could have been the North Sydney Orpheum.

[45] M. Valentine, op. cit., p. 184.

[46] ibid., p.2.

As the theatre building has become incorporated into other buildings (eg shopping complexes /malls), it has lost its identity, both architecturally and as a landmark, and has ceased to make a statement of its own. An example of this can be seen in Parkes, NSW where the 150-seat Golden West Cinema is situated inside the local RSL Club. Its tiny foyer is incapable of holding more than a dozen or so people and its single film per show policy does not lend itself to creating a sense of community since there is no interval. Apart from a small, external advertising board, the cinema makes no statement, nor is it a landmark of any sort.

For the patrons of the past, the picture theatre was an environment for social interaction and offered them more than simply what was on the screen. William Ittelson, an environmental psychologist, stated that we receive information about the environment through our senses. This material is then processed through our nervous systems in order to provide us with what is necessary for us to relate to that environment. According to Ittelson, we can only be participants in our environments and it is this that causes the distinction between *"self and nonself"* to disappear. *"The environment surrounds, enfolds, engulfs, and no thing and no one can be isolated and identified as standing outside of, and apart from, it."* [47] The path to clear understanding is, as Ittelson claimed, not without its difficulties. *"Environments always represent simultaneously, instances of redundant information, of inadequate information, and of conflicting and contradictory information. The entire mechanism of information processing in the nervous system...is brought into play."* [48] Ittelson further commented that *"environments always have a definite esthetic*(sic) *quality. Esthetically neutral objects can be designed; esthetically neutral*

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[47] W.H. Ittelson, Environment and Cognition. New York: Seminar Press, 1973, p.12.

[48] ibid., p. 14.

environments are unthinkable."[49] Thus, going to the pictures and our perceptions of the environment will be determined by a number of factors, including getting ready, who else was there, the physical surroundings, what was seen, and leaving the venue.

In a 1980 paper on the relationship between people and the man-made environment, Ross Thorne made the point that, in the past, the visual quality of the built environment had not been considered sufficiently important in much of social science research and that designers had been educated away from trying to come to an appreciation of how the public (the users) perceive buildings. As Thorne explained, architects tended to view buildings differently to non-architects and, it was possible, that buildings were not designed with human needs in mind. Thorne used a cinema complex as a model and showed that many architects did not like the building while many non-architects did. He commented that *"If everyone perceived buildings at the same level of fine detail as architects, there would be little need for architectural schools. Buildings are perceived in much the same detail as other objects in our environment that is, at a number of different levels."*[50] Almost a decade later, Peter Spearritt wrote that *"Architects...like fine arts graduates...are secure in the knowledge that they've been trained in taste."* Yet, as Spearritt pointed out, this is not always the truth.[51] (It would do architects well to be aware of John

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[49] ibid., p. 15.

[50] R. Thorne, "Perception of a 'Sense' of the Visual Environment: Differences Between Architects and Non-Architects" in R.H. Thorne and S. Arden, People and the Man-Made Environment: Building, Urban and Landscape Design Related to Human Behaviour. (Collection of papers delivered at University of Sydney 19-23 May 1980.) Sydney: Architecture Dept., University of Sydney, 1981, p. 276.

[51] P. Spearritt, "Money, Taste and Industrial Heritage" in J. Rickard and P. Spearritt, Packaging The Past? Public Histories. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991, p. 33.

Eberson's statement about the masses who *"...might not know art, but they feel it..."*.[52])

Australian architectural historian, Ann Lumley continued Thorne's line of thought (although she may not have been aware of it) when she wrote

> *"We all react instinctively to the size and space relationships of architecture, because buildings and their surroundings relate to the human figure as we walk in, around and through them. We all take pleasure in the textures and colours of walls, floors, furnishings and paving because they are places where we work, eat our meals, interact with others and carry out all the complicated taks and enjoyments of our lives. Human needs must be the concern of the architect and town planner, as well as a knowledge of materials and construction principles."*[53]

The built environment does affect us, although many people may not be consciously aware that this can occur. Tony Hiss, an American sociologist, stated that we react both consciously and unconsciously to those environments in which we live and work. *"The design principle here is that any change made to our surroundings has the potential to affect the way we experience a place..."*[54] Places give forth 'messages' to people and, in order to experience places with a deeper appreciation, we need to change our way of looking at them.[55] Some people, in order to retain their

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[52] "The Atmospheric Theatre - An Interview With John Eberson, Architect", in Motion Picture News (Better Theatres Section), U.S.A., 30.11.1926, no pagination.

[53] A. Lumley, Sydney's Architecture. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992, p. v.

[54] T. Hiss, The Experience of Place. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1990, p.24.

[55] There has been little research done into theatrical venues. One researcher, John Earl, writing in 1986 about nineteenth century English music halls, stated that *"...the behaviour of the audience is directly influenced by its physical surroundings..."* (J. Earl, "Building the Halls" in

experiences of place, take action to protect them, for example, by protesting to stop the demolition of certain buildings or the desecration of particular natural sites.

In 1982, overseas researchers, Moleski and Lang, wrote about the relevance of contemporary corporate identity programmes. What they have said can relate just as well to the world of picture theatre organisation in pre-television days (to either chains or independents).

> *An organization through the design of its physical setting communicates messages about its character and values to both its staff and public. The symbolic qualities of the environment go beyond the application of the firm's logo-type across the building as part of a corporate identity program.*[56]

Theatre chains in the past spent time and money on trying to promote appropriate images that they believed patrons expected. Hoyts, for example, ran competitions for the best-presented theatres within the company, the results of which were published in contemporary film trade journals. In the late 1940s, as part of its staff training process, Hoyts produced at least one short training film. Entitled, Guests In Our House, it presented a number of key staff positions and how they should and should not behave. Striving to make one's theatre a better place was not left solely in the hands of the chains. In correspondence with a past exhibitor of the Regal Theatre at Dunedoo, NSW, the following is offered for consideration:

> *We were both usherettes and wore a black skirt with blue blouse which we made to our liking and fashion and received lovely comments. Some theatre goers ventured to say that*

Bailey, P. (ed.), Music Hall - The Business of Pleasure. U.K.: Open University Press, 1986, p.1.)

[56] W.H. Moleski and J.T. Lang, "Organisational Needs and Human Values in Office Planning" in Environment and Behavior, Vol. 14, No. 3, May 1982, p.327.

our 'Regal' was run as well or even better than some of the cinemas in Sydney. We thought how kind and encouraging they were.[57]

In his book about growing up during the 1930s in Bolton, UK, Leslie Halliwell (well-known for his film guide books) described his childhood experiences of going to the pictures with family members. Halliwell wrote about each picture theatre that he attended and gave candid comments about his experiences. One such visit was to Bolton's Theatre Royal, a former live theatre but in use as a cinema.

Only from the outside, because of that untidy and slightly sagging canopy, did it seem a bit of a jumble: once through the casemented swing doors (and you could choose from eight of them) you were in one of the most beautiful theatres of my experience, always warm and cheerful because the predominant colour of its décor was red and the very richness of its fittings gave the building a pleasantly opulent smell.[58]

Whether or not architects and exhibitors aspired to a *"pleasantly opulent smell"* is unknown. However, there was a sense of place associated with picture theatres and a particular sense of occasion about attending them. Little of this has been recorded with regards to the Australian situation. As well, the ephemeral nature of the physical picture theatre building, with its short reign of dominance among the major public structures within a locality, has remained virtually

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[57] Letter to the writer from Mrs Gwen Tibbets (nee-Yeo) 2.4.1992, exhibitor with her sister from 1954 to 1966. Besides handling all of the business side of the cinema, the "Yeo girls" (as they were referred to in one trade magazine, acted as usherettes - because they saw it as such an important personal relations' position.

[58] L. Halliwell, Seats in All Parts. London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1985, p. 43. Note the use of the word *"experience"*.

unresearched until the last two decades. Compared to what has been done in the United States of America and the United Kingdom, little has been done in Australia even to record the buildings.[59] There is a similar void in our knowledge about why people attended and the relevance they placed on 'going to the pictures'. A few Australians have endeavoured to record data, to take and/or gather photographs and to collect memorabilia about the physical aspects of going to the pictures. What is disturbing is the lack of research undertaken into the relevance of picture theatre venues for human beings.

In 1982, the Australian Theatre Historical Society[60] was formed. Its main functions are to produce a quarterly magazine (that records past and current aspects of cinema exhibition) and to establish and maintain an archive. In recent years, it has embarked on a publication programme that has seen specific areas targeted (eg Newcastle district, the Illawarra). These books[61] have dealt primarily with the history of the buildings. A few years ago, a similar society was established in Victoria to cater specifically for the perceived needs of that state.[62]

One attempt to look at the importance of the picture show in New South Wales' country areas was

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[59] One executive of a country historical society was interested to learn that the local theatre had been designed in 1928 by Bruce Dellit (who also designed the War Memorial in Hyde Park, Sydney). The theatre had been demolished only the year before to make way for an RSL carpark and no-one was aware of who had designed it.

[60] It is worth noting that the National Film and Sound Archive, situated in Canberra, was formed in 1984, two years after the Australian Theatre Historical Society was formed.

[61] The book on the Illawarra is due for publication in early 1995.

[62] This group was started primarily for social gatherings but is now producing a newsletter and has established an archive.

Lyle Penn's book, The Picture Show Man[63]. While recording part of our social history, it was mainly concerned with the life of the exhibitor.[64] Occasional items have appeared in country newspapers, but usually when theatres were about to be demolished. For the most, this aspect of our history remains unrecorded.

John Tulloch, in Australian Cinema. Industry, Narrative and Meaning, looked at the organisational structure of the film industry in Australia from earliest times. In one chapter there is a short section on 'Country Exhibitors' that describes how film companies (predominantly American) made booking films difficult for the show men and extracting as much money from them as possible, while proclaiming that they really were their friends. In 1922, for example, the film distributors raised film rentals by 12.5% claiming it to be because of a proposed extra duty on American films. Trade journals, as Tulloch suggested, *"presumably under advertisers' pressure"*[65] did little to help.. The first two parts of Tulloch's book are worthwhile background reading on the Australian film industry as a whole. They look at the struggles it had to endure as overseas film companies slowly tightened their grip on Australian exhibition. Because USA produced so many films and Australia so few, exhibitors were forced to take American product and distributors were able to dictate terms that were not necessarily in the best interests of either the exhibitors or the Australian film industry. However, Tulloch does not discuss the history of any picture theatres nor does he provide input from the patrons who attended the pictures.

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[63] L. Penn, The Picture Show Man. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., 1977. The area covered in the book is primarily the Northern Rivers, including Coffs Harbour. A film by the same name was made in the late 1970s and used an adapted form of the book as its basis.

[64] Another example: J. W. Gerard, From Pastures Green To The Silver Screen, Coff's Harbour, J.W. Gerard, 1984. Nothing has been found for other Australian states.

[65] J. Tulloch, Australian Cinema. Industry, Narrative and Meaning. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1982, p. 69.

The books that have been written on Australian picture shows are few and have shown a tendency for approaching the subject in an ad hoc way. There are some exceptions to this. In his Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905[66] and Theatres in Australia - An Historical Perspective of Significant Buildings[67], Ross Thorne has written two specialised works that deal more with the development and architectural significance of live theatre buildings. Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905 is a two volumed set that carefully traces the development of live theatre buildings in this country. There are some references to buildings that were used as cinemas but this is limited. Contained within the first volume are numerous architectural drawings and photographs. Two of his other books trace the development of the architectural side of Australian picture theatre buildings. These works are Picture Palace Architecture[68] and Cinemas of Australia via USA[69]. The former book presents a brief look at the architectural development of cinema buildings, from the early years to the end of the 1930s. There are numerous photographs in the second part of the book that explain visually what has been written in the text. The latter is a much larger book and covers a wider range than Picture Palace Architecture. The first part details the American influence on Australian picture theatre buildings, moving through an architectural history from the earliest to the modernistic. A section at the end of the first part deals exclusively with Australian cinema architects and is a worthwhile starting point for anyone who might be interested in a general overview. The second part of the book is *"...an edited anthology of information and previously*

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[66] R. Thorne, Theatre Buildings in Australia to 1905. Sydney: Architectural Research Foundation, University of Sydney, 1971.

[67] R. Thorne, Theatres in Australia - An Historical Perspective of Significant Buildings. Sydney: Dept. of Architecture, University of Sydney, 1977.

[68] R. Thorne, Picture Palace Architecture. South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1976.

[69] R. Thorne, Cinemas of Australia via U.S.A. Sydney: Architecture Dept. University of Sydney, 1981. B. Sharp's A Pictorial History of Sydney's Suburban Cinemas (basically a collection of photographs accompanied by very little text);

published descriptions of 90 cinema buildings..."[70] covering much of Australia, although New South Wales and Victoria far outweigh the other states. There are, of course, many photographs. As one reviewer wrote, the book as a whole "*...includes a detailed introduction, some analysis, a fleeting index of references, architects, bibliography and sources...*"[71] In its day, it was considered important enough to be launched by the Managing Director of The Greater Union Organisation at a special evening function at the State Theatre, Sydney. Thorne's books broke new ground in Australia and are still looked upon as important works.

Simon Brand's Picture Palaces and Flea Pits[72] is a conglomerate-type of book that 'sweeps across Australia' endeavouring to cover in one book what might better have been covered in more depth by many. He does make slight mention of the picture theatre in relation to social life but in a shallow, rather general, way. Much of the interest in this book stems from the many lavish black and white photographs, thus making it more of a 'coffee-table book' than a reference text. Sadly, he published many photographs from one major collection of photographs from Victoria and did not use the opportunity to expand upon them in the text.

Diane Collins' Hollywood Down Under[73] broadly covers the history of cinema exhibition in Australia. The book is a scaled-down version of her 1975 PhD thesis. It is well-referenced and covers a certain amount of ground not covered in the books listed above. Besides a history of the

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[70] Australasian Exhibitor, Fri. 18.12.1981, p. 28.

[71] N. Day, "Houses of our Dreams". Review published in Sydney Morning Herald, Sat. 19.12.1981, p. 34.

[72] S. Brand, Picture Palaces and Flea Pits. Eighty Years of Australians at the Pictures. Sydney: Dreamweaver Books, 1983.

[73] D. Collins, op. cit., 1987.

pictures in Australia, there are chapters on the types of films, the role of musicians, theatre buildings, publicity, film critics, the impact of World War II on the picture business, and how cinema tried to stave-off decimation from television. The chapter on the cinema buildings attempts to cover too much and, in doing so, the effect is lessened. By using already reasonably well-documented buildings, Collins offers little new research in this area.

Barry Sharp's A Pictorial History of Sydney's Suburban Cinemas[74] is basically a collection of photographs accompanied by very little text, as is his A Pictorial History of Cinemas in New South Wales[75]. In the Foreword to his first book, Sharp states that it takes the reader on *"a browse through the past in pictures"*. A third book by this writer is A Pictorial History of Sydney's Prince Edward Theatre Beautiful[76] and deals exclusively with one theatre. The real worth of the three books is in the photographs, particularly the colour ones in the latter book.

There are some other books that deal more methodically with the histories of theatre buildings within specific geographical areas or within similar architectural styles. These books include: Kevin Cork and Les Tod's Front Stalls or Back? The History and Heritage of Newcastle Theatres[77] (a suburb-by-suburb history of the cinema buildings of Newcastle and Lake

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[74] B. Sharp, A Pictorial History of Sydney's Suburban Cinema. Sydney: Barry Sharp, 1982.

[75] B. Sharp, A Pictorial History of Cinemas of New South Wales. Sydney: Barry Sharp, 1983. The accuracy of some of the text in this and the earlier book are dubious. Confusion exists with licensing dates and opening dates, for example.

[76] B. Sharp, A Pictorial History of Sydney's Prince Edward Theatre Beautiful. Sydney: Barry Sharp, 1984.

[77] K.J. Cork and L.R. Tod, Front Stalls or Back? The History and Heritage of the Newcastle Theatres. Sydney: Australian Theatre Historical Society Inc. 1993.

Macquarie); the Australian Theatre Historical Society's *"Dream Palaces"* series (that looked at Australia's atmospheric theatres and those theatres with Spanish influence in their design, and one that recorded the history of Sydney's State Theatre); and the writer's own *"Cinema Heritage Series"* (that recorded the history of picture venues within certain suburban areas of Sydney[78]). There are a few interstate books and these tend loosely to follow a similar pattern.[79]

Little is available for the researcher in Australia about the history of country picture venues and their importance to country people even though their existence is as long and as vibrant as their city and suburban counterparts.

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[78] Cinema Heritage Series by K J Cork: Titles include -
A History of the Cinemas of Hurstville Municipality. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1985.
A History of the Cinemas of Burwood Municipality. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1985.
A History of the Cinemas of Bankstown City. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1985.
A History of the Cinemas of Auburn, Concord & Strathfield Municipalities. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1986.
A History of the Cinemas of Ashfield Municipality. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1986.
A History of the Cinemas of the Former Municipality of Granville. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1987.
A History of the Cinemas of Drummoyne Municipality. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1988.
A History of the Cinemas of the Former Municipality of Bexley. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1988.
A History of the Cinemas of Kogarah Municipality. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1988.
A History of the Cinemas of Mosman Municipality. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1988.
A History of the Cinemas of Parramatta City. Seven Hills: K J Cork. 1990.

[79] For example:
a. J. Thiele and R. Lange, Thanks For The Memory (1991 - TOSA Celebrates...) Adelaide: Theatre Organ Society Inc., 1991. Deals with the history of the Capri Theatre at Goodwood, the installation of the theatre organ and some history on the Clifford Star theatres. of Adelaide;
b. M.D. Bell, Perth. A Cinema History. Lewes, U.K.: The Book Guild Limited, 1986. Looks briefly at the city, suburban and a few close-country picture theatres;
c. V. Miller, (ed.), Stage, Screen and Stars. Perth: West Australian Newspapers Ltd., 1993. Basically a collection of photographs that covers theatre buildings, live stars, and a collection of miscellaneous theatre memorabilia.