



1 May 2023

Mr Steven Avery
Executive Director
Heritage Victoria

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File No.: B6735

Re: Permit Application P36960, Athenaeum, 28-36 Ocean Beach Road Sorrento

Dear Mr Avery,

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) makes the following submission to the above permit application for partial demolition and alterations to change the use of the building from a cinema to retail premises.

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) (National Trust) is the state's largest community-based heritage advocacy organisation actively working towards conserving and protecting our heritage for future generations to enjoy, representing more than 40,000 members and supporters across Victoria.

The National Trust is also represented locally by our Mornington Peninsula Branch, a group of volunteers who support the advocacy work of the National Trust and are a strong and independent voice for the protection and celebration of heritage in the Mornington Peninsula community.

The National Trust supports the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings to ensure they have an ongoing purpose and remain viable assets to their communities. We generally support the plans to adaptively re-use the Athenaeum Theatre in Sorrento and refurbish the site as a retail space. However, we have concerns regarding the extent of proposed demolition and removal of heritage fabric.

The Sorrento Athenaeum was Classified by the National Trust in 1996 as a place of State Significance. The Statement of Significance for the place notes the following:

The Sorrento Athenaeum was constructed in 1894 for local entrepreneur Isaac Bensilum, and designed by J F Gibbins, and is architecturally and historically significant at a State level as an early and unusually ornate and generally intact privately built 19th century theatrical hall, a rare building type. The auditorium features a large cornice and pilasters, three deep plaster domes, set into a ceiling of gridded/floral plasterwork, which also lines the proscenium wall, the Athenaeum auditorium is particularly decorative, and has something of the character of a major theatre.

Originally accommodating visiting theatrical companies and personalities during the summer season, as well as dances, balls and bazaars, films were also shown from at least the mid-1920s.

The building is architecturally significant because of its largely original auditorium, and the two storey facade, built of local limestone with brick dressings (unfortunately painted over). It is also of note as an important element in the Back Beach Road Streetscape, despite the addition of a cantilevered verandah and almost complete alteration of the ground floor facade in the 1930s.

The heritage values recognised by the National Trust, as well as the Victorian Heritage Register Statement of Significance remain evident in the place, as an early example of a theatre in regional Victoria.

We share Heritage Victoria's concerns regarding the removal of the projection room and the original timber stairs that,

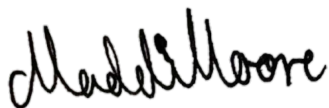
The stairs contribute to an understanding of the original configuration of the place with shops and residence above, and therefore their removal may harm the cultural heritage significance of the Place.

While we understand arguments requiring the changes to facilitate refurbishment of the foyer into a shopfront, we have concerns over the extent of proposed demolition and removal of heritage features in the foyer that would impact the ability for the site to be read as an early example of a theatre and two storey shop with residences above. We are not satisfied that the demolition and removal of the internal stairs and projection room have been sufficiently justified given the future retail use/tenancy for the property is unknown. We believe there are options for these features to be utilised by future tenants. Therefore, the National Trust submits that as much significant fabric as is practicable should be retained in situ, with appropriate conservation works undertaken as required.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on this permit application to adaptively reuse the Athenaeum Theatre in Sorrento. In conclusion we are generally supportive of adaptive re-use of the Athenaeum Theatre site. However, we have some concerns regarding the impact of demolition and removal of elements that contribute to the significance of the Athenaeum site.

For any enquiries regarding this submission, please get in touch with this office on 9656 9818 or with me directly at madeleine.moore@nattrust.com.au.

Yours faithfully,



Maddi Moore
Acting Manager, Advocacy
National Trust of Australia (Victoria)