

St James Theatre

77 – 81 Courtenay Place

(Note: see WCC ref 16/67.3 for the adjoining theatre foyer that was originally known as the 'Counties Building')



Image: Charles Collins, 2015

Summary of heritage significance

- St James is a particularly fine example of an Edwardian purpose-built theatre. It is notable for its highly competent, well-proportioned, symmetrical façade, for the technical innovation of its structure, and for its fine interiors.
- The building has served as an entertainment venue for over 100 years and its changing patterns of use are indicative of the changes in the mass entertainment industry in the 20th c. It was purchased for redevelopment by the Chase Corporation in the 'boom years' before the stock market crash of 1987. In the subsequent economic downturn the building was purchased by the Wellington City Council as a performance venue. This was part of a strategy of urban regeneration where Wellington was 'rebranded' as the 'cultural capital' of New Zealand.
- The St James Theatre is held in high public esteem. It was the site of one of New Zealand's largest heritage battles, and has been awarded the protection of a Heritage Order.

District Plan:	Map 16, reference 67/1 Note – see 67/2 for theatre foyer
Legal Description:	All Plans A 880 and 890
Heritage Area:	-
HPT Listed:	Category 1, reference 3639 Heritage Order
Archaeological Site:	NZAA Central City R27/270 Archaeological site
Other Names:	St James Theatre, 'His Majesty's,' 'Fullers'
Key physical dates:	Built: 1912
Architect / Builder:	Architect: Henry Eli White. Builder:
Former uses:	Civic facilities and recreation - Theatre
Current uses:	Civic facilities and recreation - Theatre
Earthquake Prone Status:	Issued s124 Notice –SR 266650

Extent: Cityview GIS



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History¹

The St James Theatre has played an important role in the social and cultural lives of Wellingtonians as a leading venue for theatre, film, music, and ballet, for a century. The technical achievements of this building are extremely high, and are matched by the design and style of the building which are of equivalent value, thus making the Theatre one of the historic heritage treasures of Wellington City.

Built in 1912 for Messrs John Fuller and Sons, a successful vaudeville and variety theatre company, it was originally known as His Majesty's Theatre or simply as 'Fullers'. The company focussed on performances such as slapstick comedians, balladeers, jugglers, acrobats, tumblers, and dancers, which were all extremely popular through to the 1930s. The St James was to be a replacement for a much smaller theatre that had stood on the site since the late 1870s. The building was designed for Fuller by Henry Eli White who wrote that the three essentials of good theatre design are "...a clear vision line from every seat; perfect acoustics; and a scheme of ventilation that will ventilate. Given these factors in anything like perfection, combined with comfortable seats and ample leg room, you have the basis of a good theatre". His design for the St James is characterised by a structural logic, with the plan adopting a shallow curve for the circle and grand circle that helped to create a sense of intimacy that brought the audience and performer together while achieving a large audience capacity – this was a marked departure from the popular design of the time that favoured a deep horseshoe shape. The theatre only took nine months to build and cost £32,000, and at the time of its opening it was the largest theatre building in the country, with seating for 2300, and was extremely popular through until the late 1920s. The theatre was intended for both theatre and film, and for the first nine months of its operation it ran primarily as a film theatre. From 1913 until 1930, it ran predominantly as a vaudeville theatre.

The structure of the St James was designed entirely in steel, which was supplied from England by Dorman Long and Company and can still be seen in the roof over the auditorium and the fly-tower. Concrete and brickwork are used for fire-proofing the steel, for foundations, and for infill panels. The structure of the building is marked as a technically innovative design and it is believed that this is the first theatre building to be constructed in this way. The interior and exterior of the building have been designed to a similarly high standard. The exterior façade to Courtenay Place has been embellished with Classical detailing, and Edwardian Baroque design. It has two storey high Ionic pilasters supporting a cornice, with a pediment at each end and an arch in the middle defining the main circle entrance. The main interior spaces, such as the main auditorium, have been finished with decorative plasterwork, marble, tiles, brass, coloured glass, and timber. The plasterwork is of a high standard and includes masks, cupids, full figures, highly ornate cornices, and decorative work styled in a "cheerfully theatrical Rococo" fashion. The plaster relief was picked out in gold and the "faintest flush of rose madder" which harmonised with the rich maroon Utrecht velvet upholstery. There is another innovation of design in the five entrances from Courtenay Place. This meant that there was an effective system of circulation as well as safe egress in case of fire.

¹History based on Chris Cochran, 'St James Theatre, Courtenay Place Wellington: Cultural Heritage Assessment', Unpublished Cultural Heritage Assessment for the NZHPT, 1998.

In 1926 the theatre had a series of major alterations carried out, with the addition of new floors in the top eastern end of the fly tower to the designs of S and A Luttrell. Three floors of offices were added which housed the offices of John Fuller and Sons. In 1930 the theatre closed as a live performance venue in order to be rewired for sound – when it reopened (which happened almost immediately) it was renamed the St James.

Ownership of the theatre passed from John Fuller and Sons to the Kerridge Rank Corporation in 1942, who became Kerridge Odeon before selling it on to the Chase Corporation in 1986. By this time the Theatre had fallen into disrepair, and with the St James losing its title as one of Wellington's favourite entertainment spots to newer venues, the theatre was closed. The owners at the time, the Chase Corporation, made several attempts to demolish the building leading to one of Wellington's largest heritage battles. The Corporation wished to demolish the building in favour of a new tower; however this proposal was met with significant opposition from the Wellington City Council, the Historic Places Trust, and the Wellington public. A huge campaign to save the theatre was established and in 1993, following many years of failed deals and opposition, the St James was purchased by the Wellington City Council. An \$18.5 million restoration plan was set out in 1995 and with Council, Wellington Community Trust, Lottery Board, and public contributions, the restoration commenced. The major renovation saw the auditorium restored, new seating incorporated, and a major upgrade of the backstage and services area. The original doors to Courtenay Place and the foyers remain intact, but their function has been taken over by new spaces in the former A. & T. Burt building (WCC ref 16/67.2) on the west side. New spaces also include a reception area and a café/bar area. The building was strengthened in 2000 to 100% of the then building code.

As well as playing an important role in the social and cultural life in Wellington, the St James also has a role in its spiritual life. There have been numerous reports of paranormal activity in the theatre, with the most seen spirit being that of Yuri, a Russian Ballet performer who supposedly fell to his death from the flies several meters above the stage. Others said to haunt the auditorium include a 'wailing woman', Stan Andrews, and a boys' choir.²

The building is now home to the NZ Ballet and is managed by Positively Wellington Venues. The theatre can seat up to 1550 people and is a popular performance venue. The adjoining building at 83-87 Courtenay Place (WCC ref 67.2) has been converted to serve as the main entrance to the foyer and ticket office space, and to a large first floor function room that is let for corporate and private events.³

² Duncan McKinlay, 'The Phantoms of the Operas: The Haunts of Wellington', in *Salient*, accessed 56/04/2013, <http://salient.org.nz/features/the-phantoms-of-the-operas-the-haunts-of-wellington>

³ 'Positively Wellington Venues: St James Theatre,' Positively Wellington websites <http://www.pwv.co.nz/our-venues/st-james-theatre/>

1.2 Timeline of modifications



WCA 00053: 167: 9229

- 1912 Original construction (00053: 167: 9229)
- 1926 Building additions and alterations – three floors of offices for John Fuller and Sons added at the top of eastern end of the fly tower. Architects S and A Luttrell of Christchurch, permit issued 8 September 1926, builder William Husband (00056: 18: B1796)
- 1927 Building additions and alterations - New glazed doors added to the stalls entrance. Architect Llewellyn Williams, permit issued 24 May 1927, builder William Husband
Brick alterations to theatre (00056: 34: B3368)
- 1934 Building additions and alterations – New ticket box added in stalls entrance. Architects Ronald Muston and Associates, builder Peter Shipton (00056: 142: B12855)
- 1941 Building additions and alterations – New sweet stall added in stalls entrance. Architects Ronald Muston and Associates, builder Peter Shipton (00056: 273: B22077)
- 1947 Building additions and alterations – New refreshments stall added in the circle. Architect Sydney Drake, builder Gudsell and Wallace (00056: 335: B26019)
- 1949 Possible alteration - rewiring carried out
- 1953 Building additions and alterations – alterations to women’s stalls toilets and circle ticket office (00056: 448: B34051)
Alterations to entrance doors (00056: 453: B34403)
- 1958 Building additions and alterations – Auditorium painted, seats upholstered and the stalls boxes converted to dressing rooms
- 1961 Building additions and alterations – various alterations: new dressing rooms in basement, alterations to basement access, to stage toilets,

	and to grand circle toilets. Architects Orchiston, Power, and Associates, builder Fletcher Construction (00058: 191: c8777)
1996	St James Theatre redevelopment Stage 1 (00078: 30: 24006)
	St James Theatre redevelopment Stage 2 (00078: 44: 24785)
	St James Theatre redevelopment Stage 3 (00078: 961: 26340)
1997	Building additions and alterations – renovations, including auditorium restored, new seating incorporated, and a major upgrade of the backstage and services area
1998	Alterations to café kitchen and ground floor (00078: 1264: 46856)
2000	Building additions and alterations – Earthquake strengthening
2012	Internal fit-out of the ground floor (00078: 4351: 266236)

1.3 Occupation history

Not Assessed

1.4 Architect

White, Henry Eli (1876-1952) – Architect

Henry White (1876-1952) was the son of a Dunedin building contractor and spent his early years learning a wide range of trades including bricklaying, plumbing, carpentry, joinery and painting. He developed a fascination with theatre design and educated himself in its principles while also attending Art School night classes. White's reputation as a popular and innovative theatre designer grew to the extent that he became one of the most prominent in Australasia. He eventually designed over 130 theatres as well as a number of commercial buildings. Among his most notable designs were His Majesty's Theatre, Wellington (1912), now the St James, and at the time the largest theatre in Australasia, the now demolished Midland Hotel (1916), Wellington, the Strand, Christchurch (1917), and his masterpiece, the State Theatre in Sydney.⁴

2.0 Physical description⁵

2.1 Architecture

The St James's Theatre is a three-storey Edwardian Baroque building that was purpose-built for a successful vaudeville and variety theatre company.

The façade to Courtenay Place is designed with Classical details in solid plaster; it has two-storey high Ionic pilasters supporting a cornice, with a pediment at each end and an arch in the middle defining the main circle entrance. It has a restrained Edwardian Baroque character, symmetrical and well modelled.

The interior spaces are similarly well-designed and have been finished to a high standard, with decorative plasterwork including masks, cupids, full figures, highly ornate cornices, and decorative work; all in a “cheerfully theatrical Rococo” style.

⁴ Historic Places Trust, “White, Henry Eli”, *Professional Biographies*, accessed April 24, 2013, [http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=White,+Henry+Eli++\(1876-1952\)](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=White,+Henry+Eli++(1876-1952))

⁵ Physical description is based on Chris Cochran, ‘St James Theatre, Courtenay Place Wellington: Cultural Heritage Assessment’, Unpublished Cultural Heritage Assessment for the NZHPT, 1998; and Wellington City Council, “77-81 Courtenay Place,” *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Precincts*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), COURT17 .

Note: See WCC 16/67.2 for the adjacent St James Theatre foyer / former Counties Building

2.2 Materials

The St James Theatre is one of few buildings on Courtenay Place that has an entirely steel structure. It is typical and good structural work of the time utilising angles and riveted plate connections. Concrete and brickwork were used for fire-proofing the steel as well as for foundations and for infill panels.

Timbers for the building include Rimu for floor joists; Totara for plates and window frames, and deal for doors and window sashes. The lime plaster, reinforced with cow hair was applied to expanded steel mesh which was fixed directly to the structural steel members.

2.3 Setting

The St James Theatre is a local landmark for its size, scale, and for its bold, symmetrical, Edwardian Baroque façade. It is well-known as one of Wellington's best known performance venues – most specifically as home to the NZ Ballet.

Adjoining the western side of this building is the A & J Burt Building (WCC ref 16/67.2), which now functions as the main entrance, theatre foyer and ticket office, and is home to 'The Jimmy' bar and café. The eastern side of the building is flanked by a laneway that helps to separate it from the more modern renovated façade of the 'Mermaids' building.

The theatre is one of many heritage buildings on Courtenay Place. Most, but not all, of these buildings can be found in the nearby Courtenay Place Heritage Area which includes the distinct warehouse precinct of Blair and Allen Streets, the mixed-use streetscape of northern Kent Terrace and Cambridge Terrace, and the street-wall of (predominantly) early 20th c commercial Classical buildings that line the road from Tory Street to Kent Terrace.

3.0 Sources

Cochran, Chris. 'St James Theatre, Courtenay Place Wellington: Cultural Heritage Assessment', Unpublished Cultural Heritage Assessment for the NZHPT, 1998.

Historic Places Trust, "White, Henry Eli", *Professional Biographies*, accessed April 24, 2013, [http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=White,+Henry+Eli++\(1876-1952\)](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=White,+Henry+Eli++(1876-1952))

McKinlay, Duncan. 'The Phantoms of the Operas: The Haunts of Wellington', in *Salient*, accessed 56/04/2013, <http://salient.org.nz/features/the-phantoms-of-the-operas-the-haunts-of-wellington>

Schone, Fritz. 'St James Theatre', Panoramio, accessed 24/04/2013, <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/33220699>

Wellington City Council, "77-81 Courtenay Place," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Precincts*. Wellington City Council, 2001. COURT17 .

Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

Cultural heritage values

Aesthetic Value:

Architectural: *Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?*

St James is a particularly fine example of an Edwardian purpose-built theatre. It is notable for its highly competent, well-proportioned, symmetrical façade, for the technical innovation of its structure, and for its fine interiors.

Townscape: *Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?*

The St James Theatre is a local landmark for its size, scale, and for its bold, symmetrical, Edwardian Baroque façade. It is well-known as one of Wellington's best known performance venues – most specifically as home to the NZ Ballet.

Group: *Is the item 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 building can be seen as part of a group of nearby performance spaces that include the Michael Fowler Centre and Wellington Town Hall at the nearby Civic Square, the State Opera House on Manners Street, the Paramount and Downstage on Courtenay Place, and the Embassy Theatre on Kent Terrace.

Historic Value:

Association: *Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?*

This building is of historical significance due to its association with Henry E White, a prominent theatre architect, and with the Fuller and Kerridge Odeon cinema and theatre empires. It is now home to the NZ Ballet.

Association: *Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?*

The building has served as an entertainment venue for over 100 years and its changing patterns of use are indicative of the changes in the mass entertainment industry in the 20th c. The building was a purpose-built venue for vaudeville/variety, and was soon-after converted to a large cinema (that could also be used as live-performance venue). The venue fell into decline at a time when many cinemas were converted from a single large screen to a multiple screen (multiplex) model. It was purchased for redevelopment by the Chase Corporation in the 'boom years' before the stock market crash of 1987. In the subsequent economic downturn the building was purchased by the Wellington City Council as a performance venue. This was part of a strategy of urban regeneration where Wellington was 'rebranded' as the 'cultural capital' of New Zealand.

Scientific Value:

Archaeological: *Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?*

This building is included in the NZAA Central City Archaeological area R27/270. There has been a building on this site since the late 1870s, making the likelihood of archaeological remains being present very high and protected as an archaeological site by the HPA 1993.

Educational: *Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?*

Technological: *Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?*

The building has technical value as one of the first fully steel framed, reinforced concrete building in Australasia.

Social Value:

Public esteem: *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

The St James Theatre is held in high public esteem. It was the site of one of New Zealand's largest heritage battles, and has been awarded the protection of a Heritage Order.

Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual: *Does the item have symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?*

This building has traditional and cultural values for the people of Wellington through the retention of its original use as a performance venue for over a century.

Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:

Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?

Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?

The building has had few intrusive modern alterations or additions, and has remained in use as a performance venue for over 100 years. It contributes to the sense of place and continuity of Courtenay Place, and to the sense of identity of Wellington as the 'cultural capital' of New Zealand.

Sentiment/Connection: *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

This building is likely to be a focus of community sentiment and connection as it retains educational, functional, and social use values.

Level of cultural heritage significance

Rare: *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

This building is one of the few surviving theatres of its time in New Zealand, and was a significant architectural and engineering achievement as the first fully steel framed reinforced concrete building in Australasia.

Representative: *Is the item a good example of the class it represents?*

This building is a good representative of an Edwardian Baroque style theatre.

Authentic: Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?

This building retains authenticity of materials, design and craftsmanship. It has had few exterior modifications.

Local/Regional/National/International

Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

This building is locally and nationally significant due to its architectural qualities, the connection that it has to the history of Wellington, the contribution that it makes to the present character of Wellington, its technological importance, its townscape values, and its historical associations.

4.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
WCC Records – building file		
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report		
Heritage Area Spreadsheet		
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website		
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

Background research

Insert any relevant background information into this section. This may include:

- *Additional plans, such as those for alterations*
- *Chunks of text from other sources such as Cyclopedia of NZ, Papers Past*
- *Additional images*