

Embassy Theatre

9-11 Kent Terrace



Embassy Theatre

Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- The Embassy is a particular fine example of an early 20th century movie theatre that is notable for its fine Classical 'Greek-Revival' exterior and for the quality and design of its interior spaces.
- The Embassy Theatre is the premier film venue in Wellington. Purpose-built in 1924, the theatre has long-served Wellington's film-going community. Its history reflects the fluctuating fortunes of the entertainment industry for over the past 90+ years. In that time it has gained a historic association with William Kemball and Robert Kerridge and with the 'Lord of the Rings' / 'The Hobbit' franchise that has fuelled growth in the local movie-making industry in recent years.
- The Embassy has very high townscape value. Located at the termination of Courtenay Place, its size and site make it an obvious landmark.

District Plan:	Map 16, reference 172
Legal Description:	Lots 24-27 DP 240
Heritage Area:	Courtenay Place heritage area
HPT Listed:	Category 1, reference no. 7500
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	The de Luxe Theatre
Key physical dates:	1924: Construction
Architect / Builder:	Llewellyn Williams / A. W. Williamson
Former uses:	Cinema
Current uses:	Cinema
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not Earthquake Prone (SR 183070)

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History¹

The history of this prominent building reflects the fluctuating fortunes of the film industry. The 'de Luxe', as it was originally known, opened on 31 October 1924 at a time when silent movies were an increasingly popular entertainment. The first feature screened was 'The Ten Commandments'.² The theatre's name celebrated the armchair style of seating in the dress circle which offered patrons an unprecedented level of comfort.³ The owner's confidence in the future of the film business was reflected in the size of the cinema, which had seating for 1800.

The four-storey building, which also included shops and offices, was designed by Llewellyn Williams for the entrepreneur William Kemball, of Masterton. It was built by the Christchurch contractor, W. Williamson, at a cost of £100,000. It was the largest theatre in Kemball's theatre empire, and although his far-sighted confidence in the future of film was not misplaced, the debt incurred in building it was to eventually destroy his business.⁴

The cinema showed silent films which were accompanied initially by an orchestra, and then, after 1927, by a Wurlitzer organ. When talking films arrived in 1929 Kemball installed a sound system and he was the first cinema chain operator to show the 'talkies'⁵, as they were then called. This innovation brought more patrons to his theatres but his personal spending (at one time he owned more than 500 racehorses), and his business debts, were unsustainable during the difficult years of the Depression. By 1945 Kemball had sold his 40 (or so) picture theatres in the lower North Island to rival movie mogul, Robert Kerridge.⁶

The change of ownership brought a new name and the de Luxe became the Embassy. Films continued to flourish, with a weekly trip to the pictures being the cornerstone of the social lives of many New Zealanders. In the late 1960s, however, a new kind of entertainment - television - began to lure the public away. Kerridge was innovative in response and installed a new, wide screen (70 mm - Todd AO) in 1970. However, even the very latest technology could not stem the cinema's decline, so the following year, the stalls were removed and the downstairs converted to offices.⁷

The loss of the stalls meant that the theatre was reduced in size by approximately 1000 seats. The remaining part of the theatre – the upstairs circle – is still, by current standards, a grand cinema space with seats for more than 800. The grandeur of the cinema, its wide screen, superior sound system and the vestiges of its originally decorative scheme are likely to be the reasons why the Embassy has endured while many other cinemas built in the first half of this century have been demolished. The building is of particularly high status and since 1985 has been the premier venue for the Wellington Film Festival.

¹ See also - Ian Bowman, 'Embassy Theatre Conservation Plan', (Wellington: Embassy Theatre Trust, 1997) section 1.2.

² *Evening Post*, 31/10/1924.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bowman (1997), Section 1.2

⁵ *Ibid.* (1.3)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

In 1991 the building was acquired by Brierley Investments Limited, with the intention of renovating the theatre to provide a home for the Royal New Zealand Ballet.⁸ This did not eventuate and the Ballet eventually moved to the St James Theatre – another prestigious WCC owned venue. In 1995 the Embassy Theatre Trust was formed to save and restore the building, and in 1997 with help from the Wellington City Council they purchased the property. Between 1998 and 2003 the cinema was refurbished and partially restored, and the auditorium modernised. The building underwent some earthquake strengthening. In 2004 the ownership of the building was transferred to the Wellington City Council.

In 2003 the Embassy hosted the world premier of *The Return of the King*, the final part of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Nearly 120,000 people lined the 'red-carpet' route along Courtenay Place, and many more watched the televised procession of actors and filmmakers as they made their way to the theatre for the screening. The cinema also hosted a similar event for the world premier for Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit – An Unexpected Journey* in 2012. The *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* connection have, to some extent, raised the international profile of the building.

2010 saw the completion of the earthquake strengthening project on the Embassy. The project involved adding concrete 'shear walls' in key areas and steel roof bracing above the auditorium ceiling. The project used 72 tons of steel and came in under the \$1 million budget.⁹

The Embassy has significant heritage value. As a purpose built cinema of the 1920s it is one of the few large-screen venues to have remained in near-constant use since its construction. It is an important landmark for Wellington, and it is one of the key heritage buildings in the Courtenay Place heritage area, meaning it has high townscape and contextual values as well. The last few decades have seen renewed interest in film. Wellington has seen new cinemas open, and old cinemas reopen, in the central city and the suburbs. Still, the Embassy remains the premier film venue in the city. It is the main venue for the Wellington audience of the New Zealand Film Festival and an incredibly popular destination for regular film going. With the theatre's prestige high and the completion of comprehensive earthquake strengthening treatment in 2010, the Embassy's future looks assured.

⁸ Helen McCracken, 'Embassy Theatre', New Zealand Historic Places Trust, accessed May 2013, at <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=7500>

⁹ 'Embassy Theatre Strengthening', Wellington City Council, 16 August 2010, accessed May 2013, at <http://wellington.govt.nz/your-council/news/2010/08/embassy-theatre-strengthening>



Interior of the Embassy Theatre, Wellington, looking towards the stage, ca 1925, Reference Number: 1/1-015962-F, accessed May 2013, at <http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/detail/?id=4323>

1.2 Timeline of modifications¹⁰

Original Construction: 1924 (circa)

Modification: 1929 (circa)

Modification: 1945 (circa) Sign changed from De Luxe to Embassy

Modification: 1951 (circa)

Modification: 1951 (circa)

Modification: 1960 (circa) New 70mm screen installed, as well as new lighting and sound system. Exterior façade altered.

Modification: 1970 (circa) - 1972 (circa)

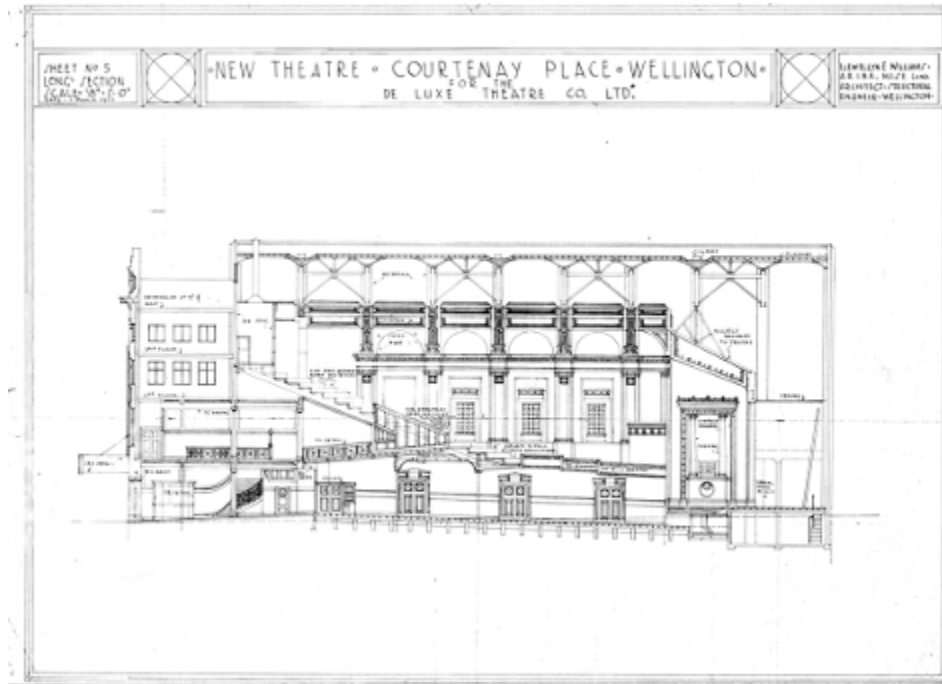
Modification: 1970 (circa) - 1972 (circa) New floor added between stalls and circle for showroom and offices

Modification: 1970 (circa) - 1972 (circa)

Modification: 1998 (circa) - 2003 (circa) Strengthening, refurbishment, and restoration. The auditorium was modernised and as part of the strengthening, a concrete floor was laid between the circle and the stairs.

Other: 2003 (circa) - 2010 (circa) further earthquake strengthening.

¹⁰ Modification details from Helen McCracken, 'Embassy Theatre', New Zealand Historic Places Trust, accessed May 2013, at <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=7500>; and Michael Kelly, 'Embassy Theatre: Heritage description and assessment', Wellington City Council Heritage Team inventory files (box 4), 1998.



WCC Archive file 00055:16:A1611

1.3 Occupation history

1924-1945 The de Luxe Theatre
 1945-present The Embassy Theatre

1.4 Architect

Llewellyn Edwin Williams (1884-1967)

Llewellyn Williams was born in 1884 in Newtown, NSW, Australia.¹¹ His parents, Edwin and Sarah, arrived in Australia in 1882 from Derbyshire, England. Edwin, originally Welsh, was trained as a master stone mason. He did well enough in Australia to become an architect by 1900. Llewellyn followed his father's career path, and studied architecture in France and England.¹²

In 1919 Llewellyn emigrated with his wife from Sydney to Wellington, where he joined Wellington architect Frederick de Jersey Clere in partnership. With Clere he designed a number of fine buildings, among the best of which was St Mary of the Angels Church (1921), as well as St Barnabas Church, Khandallah, and St Andrew's on The Terrace. At this time he taught at the Banks Commercial College, Wellington, with another prominent Wellington architect, C.H. Mitchell.

From 1923, Williams practised on his own designing a number of prominent buildings, including Druids Chambers cnr Woodward Street and Lambton Quay (1923), part of Kirkcaldie and Stains (1924), Todd Motors Building, Courtenay Place (1926), Kelvin Chambers, The Terrace (1927), Civic Chambers, Cuba St (1927), and Chevening House, Salamanca Road Kelburn (1929).

¹¹ *New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages*, No 7973/233.

¹² <http://www.wellington.govt.nz/services/heritage/pdfs/oldshorelinetrail.pdf>

He was also responsible for the design of many new theatres around the country, including the De Luxe (now the Embassy) Theatre in Wellington (1924), The Regent (1926) and Kings (1936) cinemas in Wellington (both demolished), and the Avon cinema in Christchurch (1934).¹³

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The Embassy Theatre has very high townscape value, as it terminates the view east along Courtenay Place, and it does so in a no-nonsense manner. It has a wide frontage of some 27 metres to Kent Terrace (and a side elevation of 52 metres to Majoribanks Street) and is four stories high. The auditorium, set back from the frontage, is higher again and its plain finish expresses the outline of the concrete frame on the outside. A contemporary description of the theatre calls it neo-Greek in style, in reference to the restrained Classical detailing of the central portion of the Kent Terrace façade which has an acroterion, Greek key friezes, roundels and decorated columns. Some of this decorative work is presently hidden behind an advertising screen. The significant changes to the main facade are the new entrance doors and the altered profile of the central section of the verandah.

The interior has the same restrained decoration of the exterior. The entrance vestibule has two handsome curved stairs, lined in white Sicilian marble, leading up to the main foyer and the entrance into what was originally the circle. The original volume of the auditorium cannot now be appreciated (although it is capable of restoration) as the stalls have been closed in for other uses, but original finishes and decorative work still exist. The structure is in-situ reinforced concrete, with steel roof trusses. Steel trusses also support the circle without any posts required below.

2.2 Materials

Not assessed

2.3 Setting

The Embassy occupies one of the most prominent central city sites in Wellington and fills it impressively. If Parliament is one bookend to the Golden Mile then the Embassy Theatre is the other.

At a local level the theatre is the key feature that 'terminates' the view east along Courtenay Place and is an important contributor to the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.

Sources

Bowman, Ian. 'Embassy Theatre Conservation Plan'. Wellington: Embassy Theatre Trust, 1997

Evening Post, 31/10/1924

Kelly, Michael. 'Embassy Theatre: Heritage description and assessment'. Wellington City Council Heritage Team inventory files (box 4), 1998.

¹³ <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=239>

McCracken, Helen. 'Embassy Theatre'. New Zealand Historic Places Trust. Accessed May 2013, at <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=7500>

New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, No 7973/233.

New Zealand Historic Places Trust. 'Williams, Llewellyn – Architect'. Accessed May 2013, at <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=239>

Wellington City Council. 'District Plan: Heritage Building – 9-11 Kent Terrace – Embassy Theatre'. File No. 1041-06-KEN9 Vol. 4.

Wellington City Council. 'Embassy Theatre Strengthening'. WCC. 16 August 2010, accessed May 2013, at <http://wellington.govt.nz/your-council/news/2010/08/embassy-theatre-strengthening>

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?*

The Embassy is a particular fine example of an early 20th century movie theatre that is notable for its fine Classical 'Greek-Revival' exterior and for the quality and design of its interior spaces.

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 Embassy has very high townscape value. Located at the termination of Courtenay Place, its size and site make it an obvious landmark.

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, and the St James, Paramount, Downstage on Courtenay Place, and the State Opera House on Manners Street – all of which contribute to the identity of Wellington as New Zealand's 'cultural capital'.

Historic Value:

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

The building is associated with William Kemball and Robert Kerridge, important figures in New Zealand's cinema industry. It has some association with the 'Lord of the Rings' / 'The Hobbit' franchise that has fuelled growth in the local movie-making industry in recent years.

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

The Embassy Theatre is the premier film venue in Wellington. Purpose-built in 1924, the theatre has long-served Wellington's film-going community. Its history reflects the fluctuating fortunes of the entertainment industry for over the past 90+ years.

Scientific Value:

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

The building is located in the Central City archaeological site reference NZAA R27/270.

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

The Embassy offers some educational value for those interested in the history of movie theatres. The theatre shows how many people used to gather to watch film while the grandeur of the building speaks to the cultural value formerly attributed to film-going.

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

The early use of reinforced concrete for such a large building gives the Embassy some technological value.

Social Value:

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

The Embassy is held in very high esteem and this can be seen by its purchase first by Brierley Investments as a home for the NZ Ballet and its subsequent 'rescue' by the Wellington City Council.

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?*

The building has some cultural value as Wellington's premier CBD cinema, this status is confirmed by its use at 'red-carpet' events such as the world-premier of the 'Lord of the Rings' and 'The Hobbit' movies.

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 cinema has been in continual use, (and has had few intrusive external alterations or additions) for over 90 years and contributes to the sense of place and continuity of the Courtenay Place Heritage Area, and of the wider Wellington Region.

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

The Embassy is the site of many fond memories for the cinema going public, past and present and is likely to be a focus of community sentiment and connection.

Level of cultural heritage significance

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

There are few pre-World War Two large-screen cinemas remaining in Wellington, or indeed, New Zealand.

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

The building is an excellent example of a grand early 20th century purpose-built cinema.

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?*

The building retains very high levels of authenticity. The interior has seen some change, but the exterior is largely intact.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

The Embassy is important on both a local and national level.

3.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

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