

**The Opera House**  
109-117 Manners St



Opera House seen from Te Aro Park

Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

**Summary of heritage significance**

- The Opera House is a good representative example of a Classical building designed in an Edwardian Baroque style. The exterior is a careful composition of Classical elements that form a well-proportioned asymmetrical façade. The interior is outstanding, and features a sumptuous decorative scheme carried out in high quality materials, workmanship and design.
- The building has a historic association with well known Wellingtonian Thomas George Macarthy, who was an early opera company director, landowner, and provided finance for the building works. It also has a strong association with international touring company J.C. Williamson that operated in the UK, Australia and NZ in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- The building is a well known local venue that has featured many notable local, national and international performers and performances over the past 90+ years.

District Plan:	Map 16, Symbol 200
Legal Description:	LOT 2 DP 2987 & PT SEC 213 TN OF WGTN
Heritage Area:	No
HPT Listed:	Category I - 1432
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270 Māori site of significance
Other Names:	Wellington Opera House The Grand Opera House The State Opera House
Key physical dates:	1911-1914
Architect / Builder:	Architects: William Pitt (construction supervised by Albert Liddy) Builders: Sanders Brothers
Former uses:	Opera House/Theatre
Current uses:	Opera House/Theatre
Earthquake Prone Status:	124 Served (SR 167330) – expires 16/11/2026

Extent: Cityview 2012



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History

The first purpose-built opera house opened in Wellington in 1878. It burned to the ground two years later and a new building was completed in 1886. This building, which occupied a site in Manners St, was also razed by fire, just two years later. Both were timber buildings.<sup>1</sup> A new brick opera house was open within six months. This building - the Te Aro Opera House - later evolved into the Regent Picture Theatre, a landmark in Wellington until the 1980s. By the early 1900s the Te Aro Opera House was deemed unsuitable for grand shows.

Arrangements were made to purchase land from prominent local Wellingtonian, Thomas George Macarthy, for approximately £23,000.<sup>2</sup> Macarthy had made his fortunes as a brewer and property developer and was also a director of the Wellington Opera House Company. The land was located at the north side of Manners St, formerly the site of the famous Kebbell's Mill and, from 1885, the Poneke Rugby Club Gymnasium. The transaction was complicated by Macarthy's death in 1912 when his estate passed to the Public Trustee, and by the creation of a right-of-way to the west of the site that is now known as 'Opera House Lane.' Thomas Macarthy's estate had an ongoing relationship with the opera house, and held a mortgage on the building until it was sold in the mid-1920s. T.G. Macarthy is now better remembered as a philanthropist and the Thomas George Macarthy Trust has since distributed over \$60m in charitable donations in the former Wellington provincial district over the past 100 years.<sup>3</sup>

Construction work began in 1911 and the Grand Opera House, as it was known, opened in April 1914 at an estimated cost of £37,000. The architect was William Pitt of Melbourne and construction was supervised by his brother-in-law, the architect Albert Liddy.<sup>4</sup> The builders were Sanders Brothers of Wellington and there were a number of other key contributors to the building, including scenic artist Harold Bevan, decorative artist G. Goulter of Sydney, and fibrous plaster decorator O. Wasohatz of Melbourne.<sup>5</sup>

The stage, when built, was one of the largest in Australasia, and the opera house interior was particularly notable for its fine decorative scheme carried out in lavish materials by skilled craftsmen. The lease for Wellington's (earlier) opera house had been held by the touring company J.C. Williamson Ltd since 1908<sup>6</sup>, this arrangement continued with the new opera house until Williamson purchased the building in 1924.<sup>7</sup> It is likely that the internal decorative scheme was designed in collaboration with the touring company, as the plasterwork in the ceiling of the foyer is decorated with the signature design of the company – bands of Australian eucalypts, surrounded by a border of New Zealand wild flowers, which enclosed a cluster of

<sup>1</sup> P. Lawlor, 'The Evolution of Wellington's Grand Opera House,' in *NZIA Journal* (August 1974), p.154.

<sup>2</sup> The Grand Opera House. *Free Lance*, 21 March 1914, Page 15

<sup>3</sup> 'Charitable Trust Celebrates its Centennial – Public Trust', Public Trust Website accessed May 2013 <http://www.publictrust.co.nz/grants-and-scholarships/how-do-i-find-one/grants/thomas-george-macarthy-trust/centenary-celebrations/news-and-events/charitable-trust-celebrates-its-centennial>

<sup>4</sup> The Grand Opera House. *Free Lance*, 21 March 1914, Page 15

<sup>5</sup> New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 'Buildings Classification Committee: Citation for reclassification of the State Opera House, Wellington.'

<sup>6</sup> WELLINGTON OPERA HOUSE. *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 11 February 1908, Page 5

<sup>7</sup> New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 'Buildings Field Record Form: State Opera House,' although it is stated in R. Whyte 'Up from the Pit' in *Listener* (October 24, 1992) that J.C. Williamson Ltd. built the building; BIG THEATRE DEAL. *Auckland Star*, 11 November 1922, Page 11

English roses; the symbolic flowers of the three countries where the company operated.<sup>8</sup>

Williamson's continued to own the building for the next fifty years until the company ceased trading in 1976.<sup>9</sup> In 1977, in a bid to ensure the long-term survival of the theatre, State Insurance (then a Government-owned state enterprise) bought the building and refurbished it. In 1992 the orchestra pit was dug out and greatly increased in size.

The theatre continues to host opera, ballet, drama and a range of other live performances, as it has done for over 80 years, performed both by touring international and local companies. Famous artists to have performed in the Opera House include Dame Sybil Thorndike and Marcel Marceau,<sup>10</sup> Dame Margot Fonteyn, Yehudi Menuhin and Anna Pavlova.<sup>11</sup>



View of Pigeon Park, Wellington, c.1930s. Crown Studios Ltd: Negatives and prints. Ref: 1/2-202747-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Bowman, 'Conservation Plan: Opera House, Wellington' draft Conservation Plan, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Bowman (2013)

<sup>10</sup> History taken from: Wellington City Council, "109-117 Manners Street," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), MANN2.

<sup>11</sup> Bowman (2013)

## 1.2 Timeline of modifications

1912	Construction begins (00053:171:9449)
1923	Alterations (00055:11:A1110)
1924	Vestibule doors (00055:36:A3341)
1935	Altered entrance (00056:154:B13718)
1936	Shop front (00056:181:B15902)
1944	Reinstate earthquake damage (00056:292:B23290)
1953	Extensions (00056:459:B34863)
1961	Theatre alterations (00058:175:C8109)
1979	Upgrading opera house (00058:1188:C51047)
1981	Strengthening (00058:1331:C55997)
1992	Upgrade of orchestra pit (00059:561:E25734)
1999	Improvement to access (00078:856:60354)
2001	Conversion of existing shop tenancy to café (00078:654:75578) Alteration to seating layout (00078:815:80940) (00078:1743:80483)
2003	Upgrade hospitality area, first floor of Opera House (00078:1804:105202)

## 1.3 Occupation history

1921 J.C. Williamson Limited

1998 St James Theatre Trust

## 1.4 Architect

William Pitt (1855- 1918)

William Pitt (1855-1918), architect and politician, was born on 4 June 1855 in Melbourne, son of William Pitt, artist, and his wife Jane, née Dixon, both born at Sunderland, England. William Pitt senior had arrived in Victoria with his wife in 1853 and from 1859 until his death in 1879 he ran various hotels and cafés including the Café de Paris at the Theatre Royal, which he also decorated with his paintings.

William junior was educated at Hofwyl School, St Kilda, and at Carlton College, and from 1875 served articles as an architect with George Browne. Commencing practice in 1879, Pitt that year won first prize for his design for the Melbourne Coffee Palace, the city's first temperance hotel.

The most prolific years of Pitt's architectural practice coincided with the boom period in Melbourne and his work, more than anyone else's, reflected the confident exuberance of boom-style architecture. His greatest achievement was probably his redesigning of the Princess Theatre in Spring Street.

A Collingwood city councillor in 1888-94 and mayor in 1890-91, he represented the council on the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works in 1891-92. He was a member of the Legislative Council for North Yarra in 1891-1904 and for East Melbourne in 1904-10. In 1891 he had unsuccessfully introduced a private member's bill seeking registration for the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, of which he had been vice-president in 1887-88.

Having amassed sufficient wealth to fit out an expedition to the Kimberleys after the gold discoveries of 1885 and to have reputedly purchased two million acres (809,380 ha) near Cambridge Gulf, Pitt's finances were depleted in the financial crisis of the 1890s. Determined to discharge his debts, he continued throughout his parliamentary career to produce architectural plans at great speed, in his later years in partnership with Albion Walkley who had joined him as assistant in 1900. He was in great demand as a theatre architect: as well as Rickard's Opera House (later the Tivoli Theatre), the Victoria Hall, Her Majesty's, the New Gaiety (Comedy), the Bijou, the Royal and King's theatres in Melbourne, he designed the Theatre Royal in Adelaide, Her Majesty's and the Opera House in Sydney, Her Majesty's, Ballarat, and in New Zealand the Grand Opera House and other theatres in Wellington and Auckland.

An architectural historian has described him as 'a sensitive draftsman and a competent gothicist, who might well have been more at home in a less successful practice with more time to devote to his detail, and in an earlier period when the Gothic retained a little more credibility'.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.0 Physical description

### 2.1 Architecture

The construction of the building is in load-bearing brick masonry on concrete foundations and piles. The Manners Street facade has been designed in a simplified Edwardian Classicism, with restrained ornamentation. A pleasant balance is maintained in the building's proportions between the vertical and horizontal elements, with an accentuation of the former. This is achieved by the use of slender Ionic pilasters, rising over two stories, centred on the 'piers' between the flat-headed windows. The brick spandrel between the upper and lower windows is treated as an inset panel, with a small decorative moulding in the middle. The eastern end of the building has been designed as a slightly projecting bay, with a large segmental pediment and a stepped parapet over the upper windows; this gives the facade an interesting asymmetry, as it is not matched by a similar bay at the western end. The entablature is comparatively plain. 'State Opera House' was moulded onto the frieze (today it reads 'The Opera House') and the cornice is ornamented with dentils. The fine parapet is balustraded, and steps up over the centre of the building.

The interior of the building is its outstanding component. It was modelled on London theatres of the 1880s, with a lavishly decorated three-tier auditorium and a domed ceiling. The stage facilities are unique in Wellington, and may be unique in New Zealand and include a large stage fly tower some 22 metres in height. The fibrous plaster designs (Australian eucalypts, English roses and New Zealand wildflowers) represent the three countries in which the J.C. Williamson Ltd performing company traditionally operated.<sup>13</sup> They are an outstanding feature of the interior and the primary reason for the building's Category I classification by the Historic Places Trust.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Diane Langmore, 'Pitt, William 1855–1918,' Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, accessed 30 July 2012, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/pitt-william-8058/text14061>.

<sup>13</sup> Raewyn Whyte, 'Up from the pit,' p.40.

<sup>14</sup> Wellington City Council, "109 -117 Manners Street," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings* (Wellington City Council, 2001), MANN2.

## 2.2 Materials

- Load-bearing brick masonry on concrete foundations and piles.

## 2.3 Setting

The Opera House is located on the northern side of the western end of Manners Street, opposite Te Aro Park. To the west Opera House Lane separates it from a modern multi-storey building. To the east a single storey building separates it from a double storey building. These separations help to define the building from its surroundings. The building can be seen from as far as Courtenay Place and the open space of Te Aro Park allows it to be clearly seen from Dixon Street.

It can be seen as part of a 'entertainment precinct' that extends to the performance spaces and venues on the waterfront, to the Michael Fowler Centre and Wellington Town Hall in the Civic Square, the Opera House on Manners Street, the St James, Paramount and Downstage theatres on Courtenay Place, to the Embassy Theatre on Kent Terrace.

## 3.0 Sources

Bowman, Ian. 'Conservation Plan: Opera House, Wellington', draft Conservation Plan, 2013.

'Charitable Trust Celebrates its Centennial – Public Trust', Public Trust Website accessed May 2013 <http://www.publictrust.co.nz/grants-and-scholarships/how-do-i-find-one/grants/thomas-george-macarthy-trust/centenary-celebrations/news-and-events/charitable-trust-celebrates-its-centennial>

CT vol 125 folio 224; CT vol 55 folio 218; CT vol 125 folio 223; CT vol 100 folio 256; CT vol 226 folio 172

Langmore, Diane. 'Pitt, William 1855–1918.' Australian Dictionary of Biography. National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Accessed 30 July 2012. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/pitt-william-8058/text14061>.

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Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Opera-House-Wellington-2008.JPG>, accessed 3 August 2012.

**Newspapers**

BIG THEATRE DEAL. *Auckland Star*, 11 November 1922, Page 11  
*Evening Post*. Volume LXXXVII, Issue 38. 14 February 1914. Page 6

*Evening Post*. Volume LXXXVIII, Issue 7. 8 July 1914. Page 8.

The Grand Opera House. *Free Lance*, 21 March 1914, Page 15

WELLINGTON OPERA HOUSE. *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 11 February 1908,  
Page 5



### 3.0 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 Opera House is a good representative example of a Classical building designed in an Edwardian Baroque style. The exterior is a careful composition of Classical elements that form a well-proportioned asymmetrical façade. The interior is outstanding, and features a sumptuous decorative scheme carried out in high quality materials, workmanship and design.

***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 building defines the edge of Te Aro Park, and this open space allows the building to be viewed at a distance from Dixon and Manners Street and beyond. The building is a local landmark for its function as a performance space, and for its location and architectural style.

***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 Embassy Theatre on Kent Terrace.

##### **Historic Value:**

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

The building has a historic association with well known Wellingtonian Thomas George Macarthy, who was an early opera company director, landowner, and provided finance for the building works. It also has a strong association with international touring company J.C. Williamson that operated in the UK, Australia and NZ in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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

The building is a well known local venue that has featured many notable local, national and international performers and performances 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 and there was known pre:1900 human activity on this site.

**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?*

**Social Value:**

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

The building is held in high public esteem, and this can be seen from the efforts to save the building when it was threatened with closure in the late 1970s.

**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?*

**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 in the past 90+ years and contributes to the sense of place and continuity of Manners Street and Te Aro Park.

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

The building has is likely to be a focus of sentiment and connection to the performing arts community of Wellington.

**Level of cultural heritage significance**

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

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

**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 façade of the building has largely retained its original appearance since its initial construction.

**Local/Regional/National/International**

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

Because of its status as Wellington's Opera House the building is important on a regional level.

## 4.0 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)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report		
Heritage Area Spreadsheet		
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website	Y	
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

### Background research

Mr. Bert Royle, attorney in New Zealand for Messrs. J. C. Williamson, Ltd., has successfully negotiated for the lease of the new Opera House. The date of opening will be fixed later.

*Evening Post*, Volume LXXXVII, Issue 38, 14 February 1914, Page 6

## SHOT THROUGH THE HEAD.

The body of Mr. Albert Liddy was found in his office, at the rear of the new Grand Opera House, to-day, with a bullet wound in the centre of the forehead, and a revolver tied to one hand. Mr. James Hewitt, town traveller for Messrs. Moncrieff and Young, happened to be passing by the deceased's office, and was astonished, on looking through the window, to find that Mr. Liddy was dead. He had seen deceased on Monday, and he then appeared to be in his usual state of health and good spirits. That night Mr. Liddy went with some friends to the Athletic Park, and showed no signs of worry or mental depression.

The late Mr. Liddy, who acted as superintending architect of the new Grand Opera House, of which his brother-in-law, the Hon. W. Pitt, M.L.C., Melbourne, was architect, was a general favourite with all who had business relations or came in personal contact with him. He was a son of Mr. John Liddy, a well-known theatrical manager twenty to thirty years ago. Deceased was about 45 years of age.

*Evening Post*, Volume LXXXVIII, Issue 7, 8 July 1914, Page 8.