



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION CINEMA CENTER (BLOCK 21 SECTION 35, CITY)

At its meeting of 1 April 2021, the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Cinema Center was eligible for registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Cinema Center against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.



Image 1. Cinema Center from Buda Street, (ACT Heritage, 2019)

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HISTORY

The population of Canberra grew rapidly in the 1960s. Following a program of public servant transfers from Melbourne in 1956, the population tripled and by 1966 over 96 000 people called the capital home with population growth anticipated to continue at 9 per cent per year^{1 2}. An increase in private investment in commercial development over the decade saw Civic evolve from a “*loose arrangement of two storey blocks*”³ to a retail and entertainment destination with a three-storey shopping centre (Monaro Mall, 1963) and theatre centre (Canberra Theatre Centre, 1965) catering to Canberra’s growing population⁴.

In the early 1960s Canberra was serviced by three purpose-built cinemas: Capitol Theatre (Manuka), Civic Theatre (Braddon) and the Starlight Drive-in (Watson)^{5 6}. Despite a major slump in cinema attendance following the introduction of television in 1956, by the mid-1960s the industry began to recover and Canberra’s cinemas were in high demand⁷. In this context local developer Darrel Killen began to explore options for a new independent cinema in Civic, close to the Monaro Mall and Canberra Theatre Centre.

By 1964, Killen had formed the ‘Canberra City Cinema Building Pty Ltd’ to purchase the lease for 50 Bunda Street, Civic and engaged architect Enrico Taglietti to design a new building for the site. Killen and Taglietti had previously worked together on three ‘Moteliery Pty Ltd’ developments: Town House Motel and Noah’s Restaurant (60 Marcus Clarke Street, Civic), Town House Motor Inn (Young) and Town House Motel (Wagga Wagga)⁸. At this time Killen also registered the name ‘Cinema Center’ to be used for the development. When asked why the American spelling ‘center’ was adopted, Killen cited a desire to avoid imitation of the numerous other ‘centres’ recently opened in Canberra (Canberra Theatre Centre, Griffin Centre, Civic Centre etc.)⁹.

At 50 Bunda Street, Taglietti was tasked with the design of a multi-storey building to house a cinema, shops, restaurant, art gallery and offices on a small site with height restrictions imposed by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC)¹⁰. In response to the tight site and planning constraints Taglietti located the cinema underground, allowing for four storeys of retail and office space above street level. The basement cinema model had been successful in Melbourne at the Regent Theatre (1929) and Australia One Theatre (1936) on Collins Street, and the Century Theatre (1940) on Swanston Street, and overseas at the Columbia Theatre (1959) on Shaftesbury Avenue, London located beneath an eight storey office block^{11 12}.

The first of its kind in Canberra, the underground cinema comprised a wedge shaped auditorium accommodating 500 seats arranged ‘on the continental plan’, (without centre or cross aisles)¹³. Drawing on his experience collaborating with architects Carlo De Carl and Antonio Carminati on the design of a basement theatre in-the-round at Sant-Erasmo theatre in Milan (1951), Taglietti’s design enclosed the auditorium in an irregular geometric plan, avoiding right angles at wall and ceiling junctions to create a cohesive internal volume¹⁴.

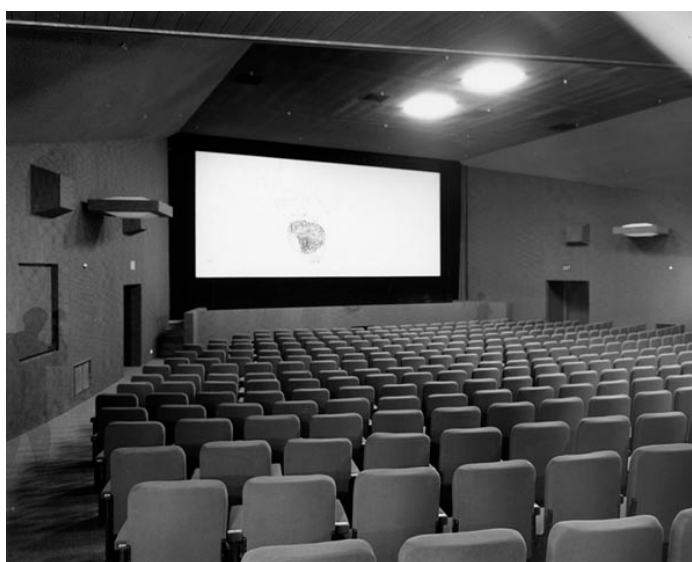


Image 2. Interior of Center Cinema (at Cinema Center) 1966 (ACT Heritage Library Image 6867)

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Taglietti worked with structural engineer Keith Sellick of Quigan, Gam and Sellick to develop a structural solution allowing for a free span cinema auditorium located wholly underground. Sellick designed three steel and concrete Vierendeel trusses that were over 4 metres deep, located at the ground floor level, to span the 22 metre width of the auditorium and support the upper floors of the building. The design solution allowed for a free span basement, and a functional ground floor layout. Due to the large scale of the trusses, the trapezoidal openings in the stanchions were sufficient in size to give the sense of an open floor plate at the ground floor, where other truss or beam construction methods would have limited circulation space and impeded use of the ground floor as a commercial space. No earlier Australian examples of the use of Vierendeel trusses to create a free span basement are known to exist. By the mid-20th century Vierendeel trusses were in use for bridge and factory construction in Australia. In Europe and the United States of America, Vierendeel's had also been used in commercial and institutional buildings as a means to run mechanical services in the hollow sections of the trusses and facilitate circulation between the stanchion openings¹⁵.

The tender for construction of the building, named 'Cinema Center', was let on 20th July 1965. Construction firm Meli and Eglitis Pty Ltd. won the bid with director Bob Eglitis managing the build. By October 1966, construction of the Cinema Center was complete and media coverage began to build momentum. A series of articles in *The Canberra Times* listed the merits of the development including: 'first class' modern auditorium with mechanical seats, freestanding wrought iron stair-case to the ground and first floors, large glass balloon lights imported from Venice, and luxurious interior design with black and white colour scheme¹⁶. The cinema itself was named Centre Cinema and was marketed as an intimate, luxurious and modern venue, modelled on examples in Manhattan and London's West End. These models avoided excessive interior ornamentation and focused on improved lines of sight, high quality projection and operable and comfortable seating. At Center Cinema, Taglietti and Killen aimed to "match, to adapt, and, of course, to surpass the trends evident in intimate theatre construction elsewhere"¹⁷.

In design of the first floor gallery, Taglietti also took a modern and innovative approach. It was the architect's intention that the gallery space be "open for displays of anything which is good design, or which is a reflection of the culture of the world". The innovative adjustable ceiling track lighting specified by Taglietti allowed for an adaptable exhibition space showcasing a diverse range of art including sculpture and installation art. To demonstrate its potential, Taglietti became involved in the direction and behind the scenes operation of the Gallery¹⁸. Taglietti also opened his architectural offices in the building, joining Charlies Restaurant, Jim Fitzhardinge Real Estate, General Accident Fire and Life Assurance Corporation Ltd as tenants of the Cinema Center.

The official opening of the Cinema Center was held on October 5th 1965, with the Canberra premiere of *Dr Zhivago* playing to a full house. The cinema became a regular venue for premieres of Australian films including *Journey Out of Darkness*, the 1967 premiere of which was attended by Prime Minister Harold Holt and Zara Holt, the Governor General Lord Casey and Lady Casey; and the world premiere of *We of the Never Never* in 1982, at which Malcolm Fraser made one of his last public appearances in Canberra as Prime Minister¹⁹. From 1978, the cinema ran 11.20pm Sunday screenings of 'Chinese' (Hong Kong and Taiwanese) movies, with film star Jackie Chan's own father Charles and possibly his mother Lee-Lee (both of whom worked at the United States Embassy in Yarralumla) known to attend screenings at Center Cinema²⁰.

Following its opening, the cinema was internationally lauded for its modern qualities, with the facilities described in New York Magazine *Motion Picture Exhibitor* as "the culmination of the newest trends in theatre construction" and in the London *International Film Guide* as "the most modern in Australia"²¹. The modern facilities attracted Ted Kercher, an experienced senior projectionist, who commenced work at the cinema in November 1966. Ted began his career at the Goulburn Odeon cinema and experienced the shift from carbon-rod-fired arc projectors and highly flammable nitrate film, to cinemascope, then Dolby technology. Kercher continued at the cinema beyond his official retirement in the 1990s, working occasional shifts until closure of the cinema in 2003²².

In the years following, Taglietti's design received both praise and criticism in architecture and building industry publications. The March 1968 edition of *Cross-section* published by the University of Melbourne Department of Architecture (edited by Robin Boyd) included a brief critique of Taglietti's design for Cinema Center:

*"Taglietti's Cinema Center doesn't succeed the way the conference centre (ACMA Conference Centre Braddon) does where perhaps there was more scope for fulfilment of his style, with the park setting and client affording the techniques of sculpture. The monolithic shapes are mocked up in timber and the slightly sloping tower roofs point up a massing which hasn't made up its mind."*²³

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However, critique in the October 1967 edition of *The Australian Architects and Master Builder's Journal* acknowledged the difficulties of the small construction site and context, and technical achievements of the build²⁴.

In 1977, leaking petrol vapour from a nearby petrol station caused a fire and explosion in the basement of the Cinema Center, destroying much of the original cinema interior. Following the event, the interior was refurbished and three permanent exhaust systems, fail safe monitors and improved water proofing, and a well outside the northern wall of the building were installed to safeguard against future incidents in the basement²⁵.

With demand for entertainment venues in the city centre continuing to grow, in 1973 Killen sponsored construction of another of Taglietti's designs for a twin cinema 'The Boulevard Red and Blue Cinemas' (later Electric Shadows) at the southern end of City Walk, Civic (corner of Bunda and Akuna Streets)²⁶. Both venues relied upon high quality international films imported by Killen and local and community cinema to compete with the Multiplex cinemas opening in the Canberra region and with the Sundown Drive-in ran under the Cinema Center Group.

The Center Cinema operated successfully as an independent venue until its closure in 2003. Between 2004 and 2018, the basement tenancy was occupied by Academy Nightclub, and in 2019 Fiction Club (FCTN) a multi-purpose entertainment venue opened in the basement with the stated aim to host concerts, club nights, exhibitions, theatre, art and performance events. Several items from the Center Cinema's history have been collected by the Canberra Museum and Gallery (CMAG), including several programs from various events, signage and a row of seating that many remember fondly for their enduring comfort levels.



Image 3 . Cinema Center exterior late 1966 (NLA A6664,L84)



Image 4. (left) Outside of Cinema Center 1977 (ACT Heritage Library Image 6851). **Image 5. (right)** Audience during the matinee at the Cinema Center 1981 (at Cinema Center) (ACT Heritage Library Image 6873)

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Enrico Taglietti

Dr Enrico Taglietti AO was born in Milano Italy in 1926, where he lived until the age of twelve when the Taglietti family moved to the Italian colony 'Asmara' in Eritrea, East Africa. In 1947, Taglietti returned to Italy to study Naval Engineering in Genova. A year later he moved to Milano to commence his studies in architecture at Politecnico Di Milano, where *"training methods were basically in the Bauhaus tradition, an approach whereby art and craft were united"*. During his studies Taglietti was *"influenced by the technical lectures of Pier Luigi Nervi and challenged by the new organic doctrines of Frank Lloyd Wright introduced by the architectural historian Bruno Zevi"*²⁷.

In 1953, Taglietti received his doctorate in Architecture and attended the Le Corbusier summer school in Marseille, France, along with fellow student of architecture Francesca Tadi. Enrico and Francesca married in 1954 and settled in Milano. That same year, Taglietti co-ordinated the foreign teams for the Italian exhibition 'X-Triennale', and the following year he established his private architectural practice in Milano. The Director of 'X-Triennale' later approached Taglietti to design and supervise the Italian art and trade exhibition 'Italy' at David Jones in Sydney, Australia. In 1955, the Tagliettis travelled to Sydney for the exhibition, intending to stay for six weeks. During the visit to Australia, Taglietti was approached by the Italian Ambassador in Sydney who invited him to contribute to the design of the Italian Ambassador's official residence in Canberra. The couple then briefly returned to Milano, where Taglietti lectured in Architectural Structure Science at Politecnico Di Milano^{28 29}.

In 1956, the Tagliettis returned to Australia, settling in Canberra where Enrico established his architectural practice (Sydney Building, 33 Northbourne Avenue). The following year Francesca's brother Ettore Tadi established the firm's European headquarters in Milan. In 1959, Darrel Killen and Ross Gibson of Moteliers Pty Ltd invited Taglietti to prepare a bid for design of the Town House Motel and Noah's Restaurant in Civic. This project received positive reviews in architectural publications, including *Architecture Today* and *Cross Section* magazines. Following the success of the Town House Motel, Taglietti went on to design several other motels in NSW including the Town House Motor Inn (Young), Town House Motel (Wagga Wagga) and Motel Hay (Hay)^{30 31}.

Taglietti was commissioned to design a number of private residences in Canberra and NSW, where, drawing upon his experience with Italian free form construction, he experimented with sculptural form, volumes, voids and framing views of the Australian bush³². Major commissions followed, including St Anthony's Catholic Church in Marsfield, NSW and the Cinema Center in Civic. In 1966, Taglietti received his first commission from the NCDC, to design the Dickson Library. In the design of the library building, Taglietti used concrete to create an expressive building form with a low maintenance and 'natural' exterior³³. The use of raw materials is characteristic of Taglietti's later work, with exposed concrete a dominant feature of his designs for the ACMA Conference Centre (1967), St Kilda Library (1969), the Italian Embassy Chancellery (1974), and The Australian War Memorial Annex (1978)³⁴.

In the late 1960s and 1970s Taglietti's architectural practice grew, with new commissions including schools, a number of commercial buildings and an increasing number of private residences in Canberra and NSW, as well as a drive-in cinema. Taglietti earned a solid reputation as a designer of distinctive homes with interior spaces both functional and sculptural. At the Dingle House (1968) in Hughes, Taglietti designed a series of interlocking angular forms, with elevated living spaces enclosed by a wrap-around deck with horizontal balustrading. His residential designs during this period are described by architectural critic Jennifer Taylor as having a "fortress like manner"³⁵, with their solid forms, courtyard walls and projecting balconies creating transitional spaces between the interior and surrounding environment.

Commissions for four new schools in the ACT provided opportunities for Taglietti to work at a greater scale. To *"elicit emotional excitement"* in his school building designs, Taglietti manipulated the internal volumes for dramatic impact. This is best achieved in his design for Giralang Primary School (1976), where *"angled and curved internal subdivision and changes of level achieve a dramatic effect, with space flowing up, down, in and out"*³⁶. The success of the design for Giralang Public School was acknowledged by the Canberra Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA), who in 1977 awarded Taglietti the RAIA Canberra Medallion for Architectural Excellence.

Taglietti also designed a number of diplomatic buildings in Canberra over the course of his career, the penultimate of these being the Apostolic Nunciature, Red Hill (1978), for which he received a Certificate of Merit at the RAIA Act Chapter Architecture Awards in 1979, and, a Knighthood of St Gregory the Great, an honour usually awarded by the Pope for religious service.

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Shortly after the Cinema Center, Taglietti designed the Sundown Drive-in. Designed in 1968 and built in 1969 the central building reflected his architectural style and innovative thinking in a sunken form that housed the canteen and offices with low angle roof housing the protection booth to minimise its impact on patrons viewing.³⁷

Taglietti's architecture aims to create both artistic and beautiful exterior forms, with interior spaces that both satisfy the needs and elicit an emotional response from those who inhabit the space. His distinctive buildings are articulated by what the architect called a collection of stylistic expressions, or 'calligraphy', including horizontal flat roof forms, deep balconies often cantilevered, natural (unfinished) exterior materials, sloping fascias and balustrades. These stylistic expressions, are key characteristics of the Late 20th Century Organic' architectural style, of which Taglietti is considered a key practitioner³⁸.

In 2001, Taglietti was made a life fellow of the RIAA and in 2007 he was awarded the RIAA Gold Medal celebration of his contribution to Australian architecture³⁹. Before his passing in 2019, Taglietti's work and contribution to the nation's capital was celebrated by a series of events and exhibitions and a symposium at the National Gallery of Australia, as part of the 2018 DESIGN Canberra festival⁴⁰.

On 26 January 2020, Dr Taglietti was posthumously awarded an Officer of the Order of Australia for distinguished service to architecture, particularly in the Australian Capital Territory, to education, and to professional organisations.⁴¹



Image 6.(left) Giralang Primary School 1978 (NAS A6180 11626666)

Image 7.(right) Dingle House (Michael Wee, 2016)

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DESCRIPTION

The Cinema Center is sited on Bunda Street, between the two storey inter-war building housing Gus' Café and a modern six storey office building. A freestanding building with four lower storeys articulated by cantilevered balconies and an asymmetrical fifth storey tower plant visible from the street, the Cinema Center is distinct from its immediate context.

The building's rendered masonry walls are punctuated by horizontally proportioned sliding sash windows to the northern and eastern elevations and vertical windows set into deep recesses on the upper floors of the western elevation. Window openings in the south wall of the second and third floors are located in gaps between the trapezoid openings of a two storey height steel and concrete Verindeel truss.

The cantilevered balconies wrap around the building face at the upper floors, giving the building a horizontal quality and grounding its form. At the time of construction the ground floor awning, first floor balcony and plant level roof fascia were clad in stained western red cedar boards laid horizontally, and the second and third floors clad in asbestos sheeting painted white to contrast the charcoal grey rendered cement walls. The ground floor awning extends along the length of the northern façade and provides a deep threshold zone between the streetscape and interior of the building.

The ground floor awning and first floor balcony soffits are distinguished by exposed Rolled Steel Joists and tri-lock metal roof decking, with additional welded steel panels laid out in a three dimensional triangular pattern lining the north-east, north-west and south-east corners. The fluorescent backlit 'Center Cinema' light, which was once mounted to the face of the awning has been removed (now part of the Canberra Museum and Gallery collection), and the western red cedar cladding to the awning and first floor balcony replaced with fibre cement sheeting. The original metal 'Cinema Center' sign and logo remain mounted on a section of blank wall on the principal elevation facing Bunda Street.



Image 8 (left). View of Cinema Center sign and asymmetrical tower from Bunda Street footpath (ACT Heritage, 2019)

Image 9 (right). View of welded metal soffit (underside of ground floor awning) (ACT Heritage, 2019)

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The principal entrance to the building is located in a deep recessed opening in the ground floor façade facing Bunda Street. When the cinema was in operation all levels of the building were accessed through two adjacent pairs of glazed doors at the centre of this recess. These doors have since been removed and a new glazed shopfront with single entrance door installed to provide access to the ground and upper floors. The basement level is now accessed via new doors located in the western wall of the recess leading to the original basement staircase.



Image 10. Recessed entry and ground floor awning (ACT Heritage, 2019)

Three Vierendeel trusses, each being over four meters deep and made of steel and concrete, are located at the ground floor to support the expansive basement located below street level. The Vierendeel trusses comprise a rigid welded steel frame with open web stanchions and parallel chorded girders encased in concrete. The basement is enclosed in a concrete shell, with thick concrete retaining walls and integrated columns around the perimeter bearing the load of the trusses and mezzanine level above. The splayed internal walls and ceiling lining of the original cinema auditorium have been removed to accommodate an open plan entertainment space.

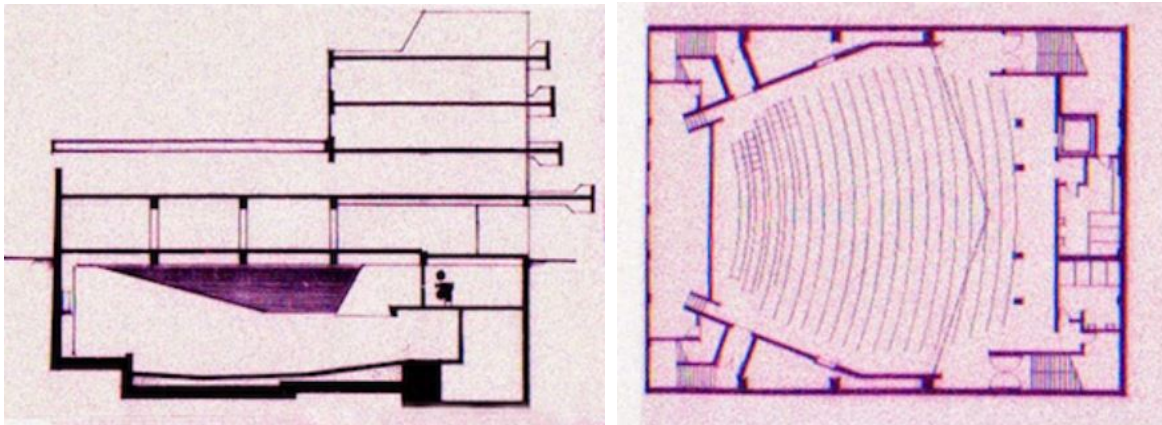


Image 11 (left). Early sketch, section showing basement and trusses at ground floor (Enrico Taglietti, 1964)

Image 12 (right). Early sketch, basement floor plan (Enrico Taglietti, 1964)

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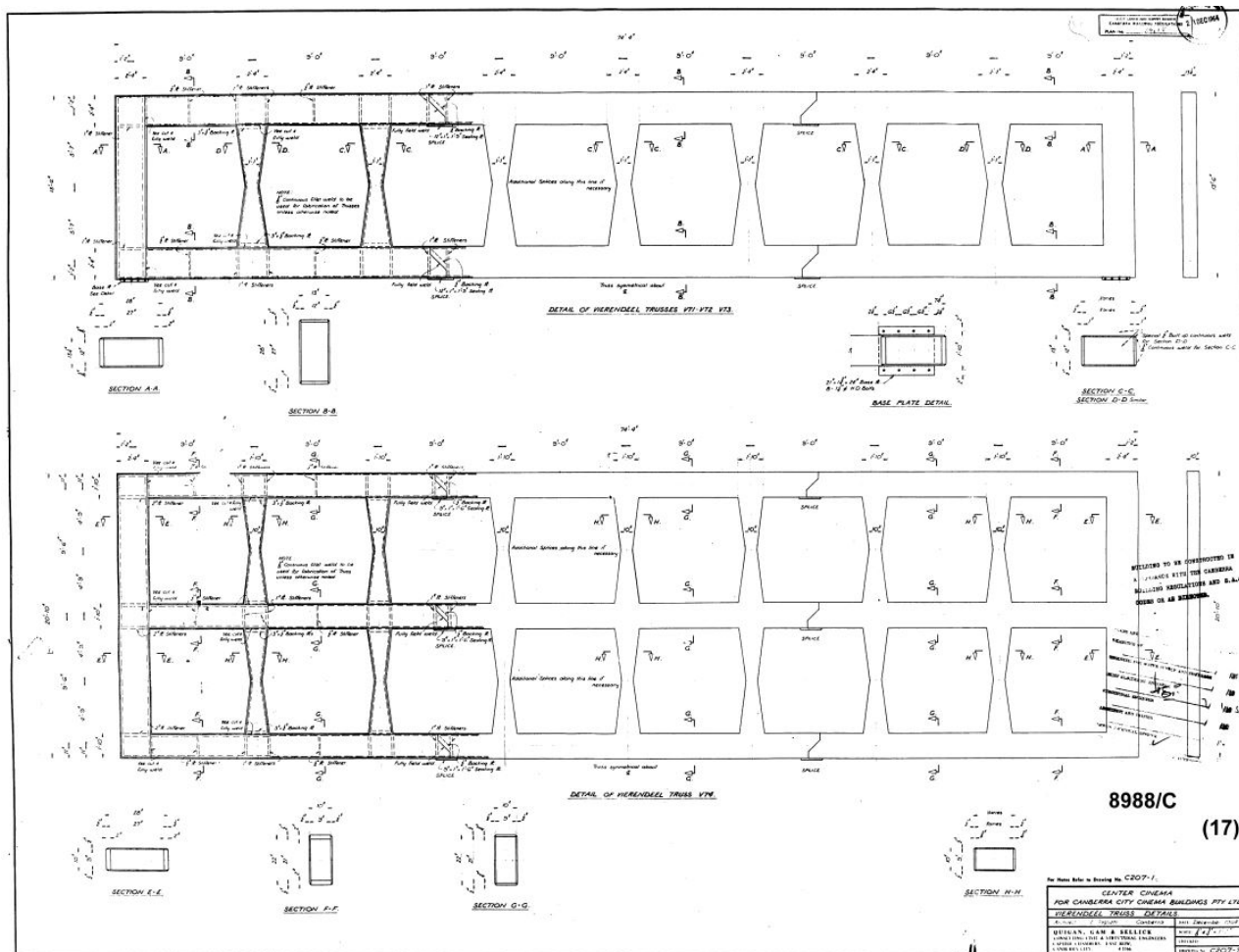


Image 13. Structural engineer’s drawings Vierendeel Trusses – K Sellick 1965

Two restaurants now occupy the ground floor, which has been substantially reconfigured since the building’s 1965 opening. Within these restaurant tenancies sections of the Vierendeel trusses supporting the upper floors of the building are exposed. In lieu of the original expansive entrance at ground floor and wrought iron staircase leading to the first floor ‘rotunda’ and office spaces, a small hallway leads to a central staircase providing access from the ground floor to the first floor lobby space and tenancies. At the first, second and third floors the original interiors have been stripped, and new shopfronts installed throughout.

The original interior contained five shops, a restaurant and the cinema box office in the concourse at ground floor level, the cinema and a mezzanine containing a refreshment bar in the basement, the gallery and office tenancies at the first, second and third floors and a roof top plant. When the Cinema Center opened in 1965, the interiors were decorated in black and white with high quality finishes and a series of photo-murals depicting classic film stars and stills greeting visitors to the ground floor. The distinctive qualities of the interior were described in an article in *The Canberra Times* as follows:

“The outstanding feature of the interior - the point which makes immediate impact - is that the basic scheme is black and white...The floor of the ground floor concourse is terra cotta tile, with parquet and carpet in the shops and some of the offices. The lighting on the ground floor, as in most other parts of the building, will be concealed. Huge glass balloon lights have been imported from Venice for the first floor gallery. A feature of the ground and first floors will be the free standing staircase crowned by Colonial Heritage wrought iron from an old Sydney North Shore home. On the walls of the ground floor and the carpeted staircase leading down to the Center Cinema are photo-murals from the world of the cinema.”⁴²

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Image 14 (left), Image 15 (right). Ground floor interior (Shorty's Bar) with exposed Vierendeel Trusses (Shorty's 2018)

Physical condition and integrity

The interior of the Cinema Center has been substantially modified and little of Taglietti's interior design detailing remains intact or on display. Alterations to the ground floor entrance, lobby and first floor rotunda have obscured the original floor plan and modified the internal circulation pattern. At the ground floor several of the tenancies, the original ground floor entrance and lobby have been amalgamated to accommodate 'Shorty's' restaurant and bar. The original terracotta floor tiles and acoustic tile ceilings have been removed or concealed.

The ground floor lobby has been reduced to a small hallway connecting the single leaf glazed entry door to the first floor stair and a new set of bathrooms servicing the restaurant. The original wrought iron stair connecting the ground and first floors has been replaced with a contemporary steel stair with vertical balustrade. The balloon lights have been removed, and new tile flooring and plasterboard ceilings installed throughout the ground floor.

At the first floor, the rotunda enclosing the original staircase has been removed and the entrances to the tenancies squared off. New floor tiles have been installed to the first floor lobby space and the tenancies at the upper floors individualised with vast majority of original fittings, fixtures and finishes removed.

The black and white theme and interior detailing of the cinema has been lost over time and the basement space reconfigured. The splayed internal walls and ceilings enclosing the original cinema auditorium have been removed, leaving the structural components exposed in the basement. The mezzanine level has also been altered, with walls removed to provide visual access to the performance space below.

A large street tree obscures views to the building from Bunda Street, however the form and massing of Taglietti's design remains evident. The tree, albeit in a very stylised form, was included in Taglietti's scale model (Image 18) provided to the NDC, showing that the size of it was taken into account early on in the design phase. The exterior of the building appears to be in good condition with rendered masonry walls, awnings, balconies and soffits intact. No physical evidence of the original western red cedar horizontal cladding to the balcony fascias remains and the exterior walls, balconies, soffits, fascias and been painted in beige. These changes have diluted the original design and the effect of the lightweight cantilevered balconies projecting out from the solid masonry structure.

The eastern elevation of the building is the most modified, with openings in the ground floor façade enlarged to accommodate bi-fold doors and a new outdoor seating area with platform decking and balustrade installed adjacent to the building. The exterior signage has also evolved over time, with the original 'Center Cinema' signage removed from the ground floor awning, and large signs installed on the façade advertising businesses located in the basement and ground floor.

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Image 16 (left) Exterior of Cinema Center (ACT Heritage, 2019)

Image 17 (right) Interior of Cinema Center - First floor lobby (ACT Heritage, 2019)

Scale model of the building

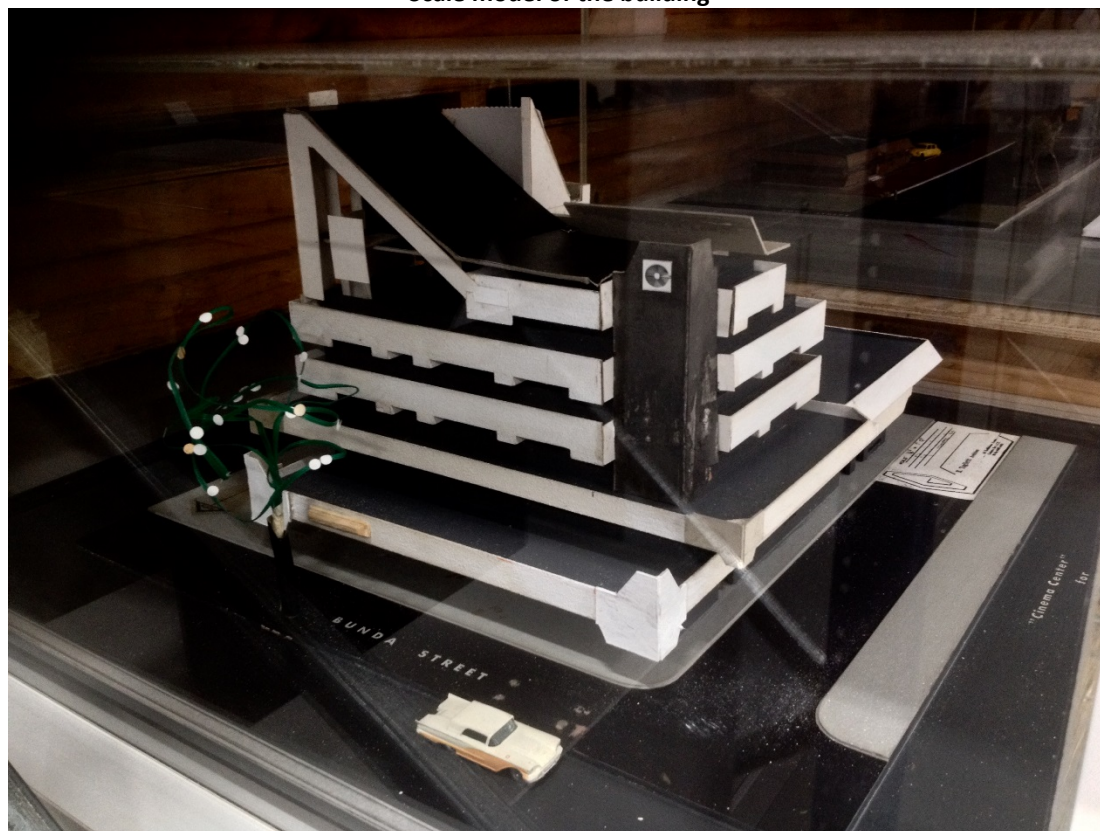


Image 18 Scale model concept design including an unbuilt top floor extension (model: Taglietti, 1968; image: ACT Heritage, 2019)

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SITE PLAN



Image 18 - Cinema Center site boundary

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