

# THE OLD SAVOY CINEMA, NEW STREET, SOUTH MOLTON, DEVON

(NGR SS 71630 25866)

Results of an historic building survey

North Devon planning reference 46111

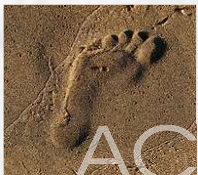
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On behalf of:  
Devon Property Developments Ltd

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archaeology

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### **Acknowledgements**

The recording was commissioned by Mr Steve Jones of Devon Property Developments Ltd and managed for AC Archaeology by John Valentin. The survey was carried out by Sarah Cottam. The illustrations for this report were prepared by Sarnia Blackmore and Leon Cauchois.

The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of AC archaeology and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

## Summary

*An historic building record of The Old Savoy Cinema in South Molton was prepared by AC archaeology in December 2008. The investigation was undertaken in advance of the demolition of the building and the construction of residential dwellings within the plot. The latter were constructed on new slabs above the existing ground level, negating the requirement for an archaeological watching brief.*

*The Old Savoy Cinema was constructed in 1935 in the typical Art Deco architecture of the period, which was principally displayed on its west, front façade onto New Road. It retained many of its original doors and windows, as well as some fixtures and fittings associated to its use as a cinema such as the pulleys and wires within the fly space above the stage. The first-floor projector room still housed two 35mm Gaumont Kalee projectors and two arc rectifiers.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION (Fig. 1)

1.1 Historic building recording was carried out by AC archaeology on 23 December 2008 at The Old Savoy Cinema, New Road, South Molton, Devon (NGR SS 71630 25866; Fig. 1). The investigation was commissioned by Mr Steve Jones of Devon Property Developments Ltd and required by North Devon District Council as a condition of planning permission (reference 46111) for "demolition of cinema & erection of 6 dwellings". Guidance on the scope of work was provided by the Devon County Council Historic Environment Service.

1.2 The building was located on the east side of, and fronted onto, New Road, close to the junction of New Street and East Street. The road was constructed in the early 1840s (Devon Historic Environment Record (HER) ref. MDV51873). The property was situated at a height of 130m aOD on ground that gradually sloped down to the southeast. The underlying geology of the area is Carboniferous Mudstone and Siltstone of the Bude Formation; there are no superficial deposits recorded (British Geological Survey online 2017).

### 2. AIM

2.1 The aim of the investigation was to prepare a record of the building prior to its demolition.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The record was carried out in accordance with a written scheme of investigation prepared by AC archaeology (Valentin 2008), and was prepared to Level 2 as set out in the then applicable *Understanding Historic Buildings: A guide to good recording practice* (English Heritage 2006), and carried out in accordance with the AC archaeology *General Site Recording Manual*.

3.2 The record comprised the following elements:

- A photographic record of the interior and exterior of the building, including general views and details of architectural fixtures and fittings;
- A written description of the building; and

- Annotated as existing plans to show the function of rooms.

### 3.3 The recording considered the following:

- Site layout and organisation, including function of rooms;
- Materials and method of construction;
- Internal arrangements and evidence of alterations; and
- Original and subsequent fixtures and fittings, along with architectural features for the period

## 4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

4.1 A settlement at South Molton is recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086 when it was known as Sut Moltona (MDV19276), although it is likely to have much earlier origins. The site is located within medieval burgage plots to the rear of East Street (MDV60809). New Road itself is recorded as being constructed in the 1840s (MDV51873), and is depicted on the South Molton tithe map of 1846.

4.2 The South Molton tithe map records that the site formed part of a larger north-south aligned linear burgage plot to the rear of East Street (plot no. 1153). The accompanying apportionment names it as 'Part of Howell's Tenement', with the land-use described as pasture. The plot was owned and occupied by Thomas Jones.

4.3 By 1889, Plot 1153 had been subdivided and the footprint of the recorded cinema was occupied by a single east-west aligned building in the northeast corner, which HER describes as 'William Sander's sawmill' (MDV64884). By 1904 an east-west aligned long narrow building had been constructed along the south boundary of the plot.

4.4 The Old Savoy Cinema was constructed in 1935, and may have been the only Art Deco style building in the town (MDV64884). It had one screen and the auditorium seated approximately 350. The cinema closed in the 1970s, and was subsequently used variously as a bingo hall, public entertainment venue, retail outlet and an auction house. The building was last used in 2003, and was demolished in 2009.

## 5. THE CINEMA (Fig. 2; Plates 1-19)

### **The exterior** (Plates 1-4)

5.1 The property was a two-storied, rectangular structure, designed in the Art Deco style, and aligned east-northeast-west-southwest filling the whole of its plot. The front of the property faced New Road, with a narrow private road leading to three residential properties immediately to the south. The rear of the property was bound by a rubble stone wall with concrete capping stones. The walls of the cinema were constructed of concrete blocks with the front finished a typical Art Deco style of painted rendered masonry and brickwork (see 5.2 below). The roof of the front of the building was flat and stepped up toward the centre, with the rear larger section gabled with a shallow pitch to the roof line finished with what appeared to be corrugated asbestos sheets.

- 5.2** The west elevation was the principle façade, with the exposed brickwork – red bricks laid in stretcher bond – arranged in rectangular blocky vertical and horizontal forms in a geometric fashion, broken up by sections of painted render/stucco in a classic Art Deco style aiming for a monolithic appearance. The top half of the façade appeared as a stepped pediment rising above a central flat canopy projecting above the entrance bay. Above the canopy, within the gable, was a grouping of three tall narrow rectangular windows appearing as punctured openings (which were boarded up at the time of the site visit). Below each window were four vertical fluted lines formed within the render, whilst above was a narrow ledge. Directly overhead this at the apex of the façade in a font characteristic to the Art Deco period and painted in a teal green colour was the name ‘SAVOY.’ standing proud from the elevation. Beneath the canopy were three large doorways into the foyer and ticket office. The splayed sides of the entrance bay, either sides of the doorways, displayed evidence for former fixings of display panels for the films being shown.
- 5.3** Only a small section of the west end of the north elevation was visible as it abutted a high rubble stone wall where access beyond was not attainable. The elevation was predominately finished in stretcher bond red brickwork with a band of render/stucco at the top of the elevation and within a large square space which would have been utilised for display purposes. In the space between the square display area and the high rubble stone wall were two small window openings roughly halfway up the elevation. The windows were boarded up, but the detail of the surrounds – bricks laid in stretcher bond to the sides and header bond to the top and bottom – of these windows and the square display area was still visible.
- 5.4** The south elevation displayed two different treatment styles. The west end, closest to the street frontage of New Road, was finished in the Art Deco style similar to the principle façade with bands of stretcher bond brickwork and painted render/stucco. The rear section of the elevation was finished with exposed concrete blocks covered with corrugated asbestos sheets at the top quarter of the elevation. The west end of the elevation incorporated a tall doorway opening and three small window openings, all of which were boarded up. The lintels and sills were bricks laid with their headers on display. At the east end of the elevation there was a timber plank stage door, with a concrete lintel.
- 5.5** The east elevation was constructed of concrete blocks with a window opening partially visible at the south end; this had a concrete lintel. The rest of the elevation was obscured by the rubble stone boundary wall. The rear elevation, which accommodated the stage, stepped out in the centre and had chamfered edges.

### **The interior**

- 5.6** The internal ground-floor arrangement could be divided into two areas; the foyer area at the west end, and the auditorium and stage to the east. Access to the first floor was from the southeast corner room of the foyer. Original fixtures and fittings were present, and although many newer fixtures were noted, such as modern strobe lighting, other fittings such as the original brass light fixtures were still *in situ*.

### **The foyer** (Plates 5-9)

- 5.7** The foyer area comprised four rooms; a large central entrance foyer with subsidiary rooms to the north and south. Access to the first floor above the foyer area was via the ladder within the southeast corner room of the foyer and was not for public access. The foyer would have been utilised for ticket sales and may also have contained W/C facilities. The original doors within the foyer were original, with one of the handles having a classic Art Deco motif. The two front double doors (not

visible from the exterior) had large glazed panels with brass handles. The walls had a regular white painted plaster finish with the doors and door frames painted a dark green, none of which were original. The southeast corner room of the foyer contained the original ladder style timber staircase to the first floor; the concrete block walls of this room were left exposed and unpainted.

**The auditorium** (Plates 10-13)

**5.8** The auditorium took up most of the space of the building and was located within the eastern three quarters of the structure. This part of the building did not have a first floor above. Access to the auditorium was through three doors located symmetrically along the east elevation of the foyer, each under a concrete lintel visible only within the auditorium. The east and west doorways were fitted with timber push bar doors, whilst the central double door had a central glazed circular pane; all were probably original. As is traditional with cinema buildings the floor sloped down towards the stage from the foyer and was constructed of concrete; the seating on the floor had been removed. The concrete block walls were exposed; any original finish had been removed. The ceiling had a white painted plaster finish, below which was an *in situ* muted green painted coving. Along the north and south elevations and centrally along the ceiling were air vents. Above the doorways to the foyer on the west elevation were the holes for the projector to project the films onto the screen which would have been located on the stage at the east end of the room.

**5.9** The proscenium and raised stage were located at the east end of the auditorium. A part of the proscenium arch was still *in situ* and had a relatively plain moulded design. The stage had a small fly space above with its pulleys and wires for curtains and screen still *in situ*. To either side of the stage were staircases to the under-stage level providing access to the rear exterior of the property through what appeared to be original 1930s push bar doors. The walls in these areas were white painted concrete blocks.

**First floor** (Plates 14-19)

**5.10** The layout of the first floor remained as it was first constructed. It had clearly not been utilised post cinema closure, with the furnishings present still dating to the building's use as a cinema. There were three rooms and a corridor. The larger room situated to the east side of the corridor was the projector room and could be accessed separately using the ladder from the ground-floor foyer. The corridor was aligned north-south, with access to the outside roof space at the north end of the corridor through a four-panel timber door. Roughly centrally located along the east and west elevations of the corridor were doorways to the projector room to the east and two smaller subsidiary rooms to the west.

**5.11** The west partition wall of the corridor was constructed of concrete with the original paintwork applied in classic Art Deco style comprising of white and pale teal colours bordered with black paint in a symmetrical, rectilinear geometric design. The three windows in the front façade were fitted with timber frames and textured glazed panes.

**5.12** The projector room had blue paint applied to the concrete block walls and the ceiling was plastered. At the north end of the west elevation of the room was a metal sliding door with the metal frame and runner above the door for the wheel mechanisms of the sliding door still *in situ*. Such a door was probably fitted as a fire preventative measure in accordance with the Cinematograph Act 1909 that specified the projector should be enclosed within a fire resisting room. In the north and south elevations of the room were two windows; both had been painted over and boarded

up on the exterior to prevent daylight from entering the room, but were also fitted with two textured pane casements either side of a fixed two-pane casement.

- 5.13** Along the east elevation of the projector room there were two ‘*Gaumont Kalee*’ Gk21 35mm cine film projectors *in situ*. They were probably original and installed when the building was constructed. Two projectors were required as the projectionist would need to switch to the next reel of film during the playing, having one projector as operating and the other waiting ready for the reel change when prompted. In addition to electrical ducting and boxes, additional projector room paraphernalia was also present including a wall mounted thermometer, two arc rectifiers, and an early record player.

## **6. WATCHING BRIEF (Plate 20)**

- 6.1** It was originally anticipated that an archaeological watching brief was to take place after demolition of the property, during subsequent groundworks which initially would have included ground reduction followed by the excavation of foundation trenches, services trenches and other groundworks associated with new access roads and car parking. However, a large concrete slab was placed over the site after demolition of The Old Savoy Cinema and the new buildings were constructed off this slab with ground reduction or new foundation trenches excavated. Therefore, no archaeological monitoring was required.

## **7. COMMENTS**

- 7.1** The Old Savoy was a standard example of 1930s cinema, erected towards the end of the peak period of cinema construction (English Heritage 2011, 7). It contained a single screen and auditorium, and its small size probably reflects the rural location; urban cinemas were typically larger, housing several screens. In a common design, public areas were housed in a block on the street frontage, with the auditorium and stage to the rear. Its external appearance was both functional and aesthetically pleasing. Typical of many Cinema buildings of this period the external treatment in contemporary Art Deco style was only applied to the front elevation and adjacent side elevations where the building was visible from the street frontage; the remainder was starkly functional.

- 7.2** Few alterations to the interior took place after its closure in 1970. However, the seating had been removed from the auditorium and the foyer area was re-decorated to accommodate the building's subsequent retail and commercial uses. Here only scant evidence of the original finishes survived, although the floor plan remained largely intact. The first floor had remained unused since closure, and evidence of the Art Deco finishes was more prominent. Fittings in the projector room including pairs of projectors and rectifiers also survived *in situ*.

## **8. ARCHIVE AND OASIS ENTRY**

- 8.1** The digital archive for this project will be deposited with the Archaeology Data Service within three months of the submission of this report to the Devon County Historic Environment Service.



- 8.2** An OASIS entry has been completed using the unique identifier 283564, and includes a digital copy of this report.

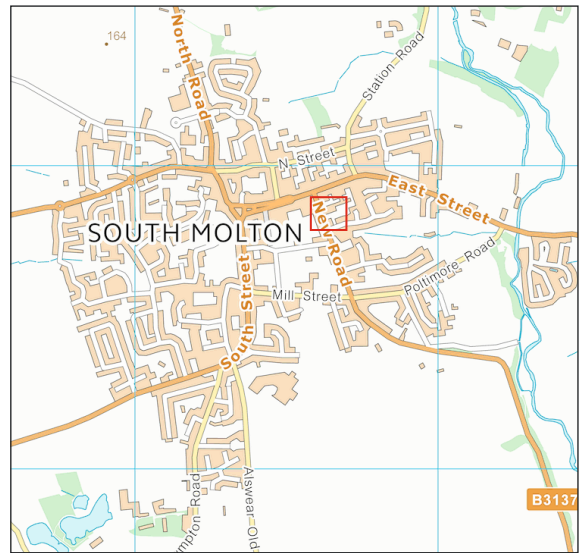
## **9. SOURCES CONSULTED**

English Heritage, 2006, *Understanding Historic Buildings: A guide to good recording practice*

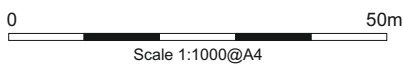
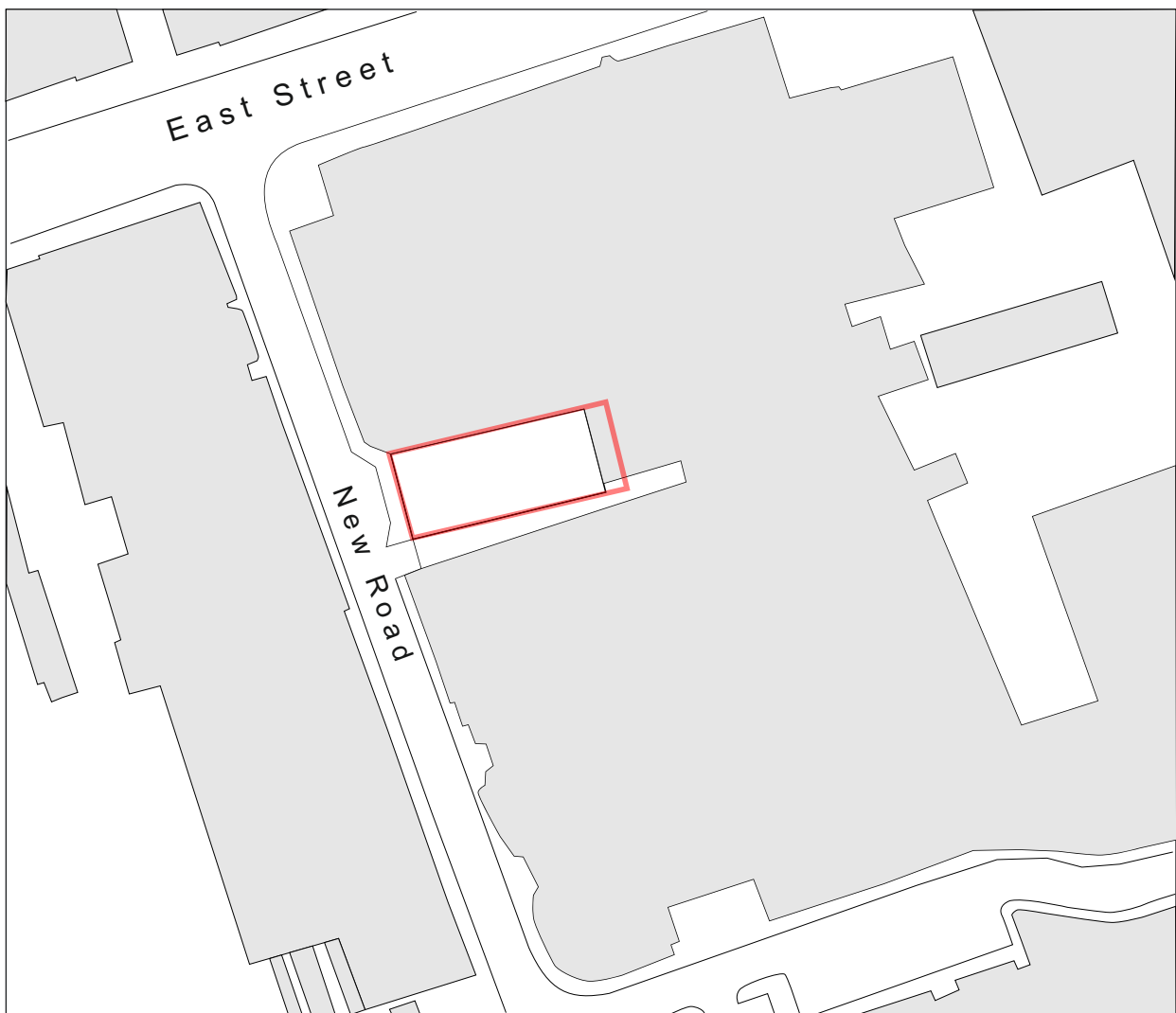
English Heritage, 2011, *Designation Listing Guide Selection, Culture and Entertainment*

Valentin, J., 2008, *The Old Savoy Cinema Site, New Road, South Molton, Devon (NGR SS 71630 25866), Method statement for historic building recording and archaeological watching brief, North Devon District Council planning reference 46111, AC Archaeology document no. **ACD33/10***

**Website** (accessed April 2017)  
British Geological Survey on-line viewer  
[www.bgs.ac.uk](http://www.bgs.ac.uk)



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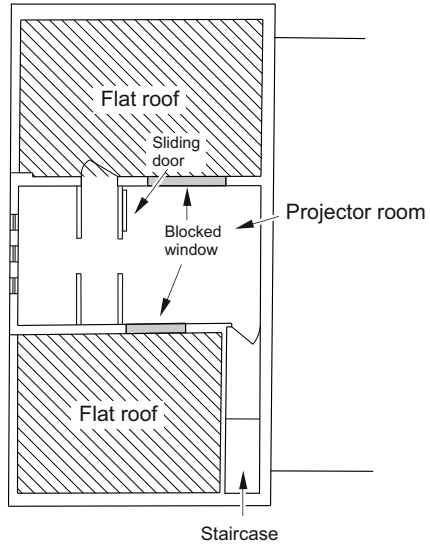
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**The Old Savoy Cinema, New Road, South Molton, Devon**

TITLE

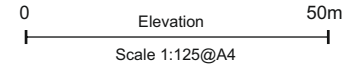
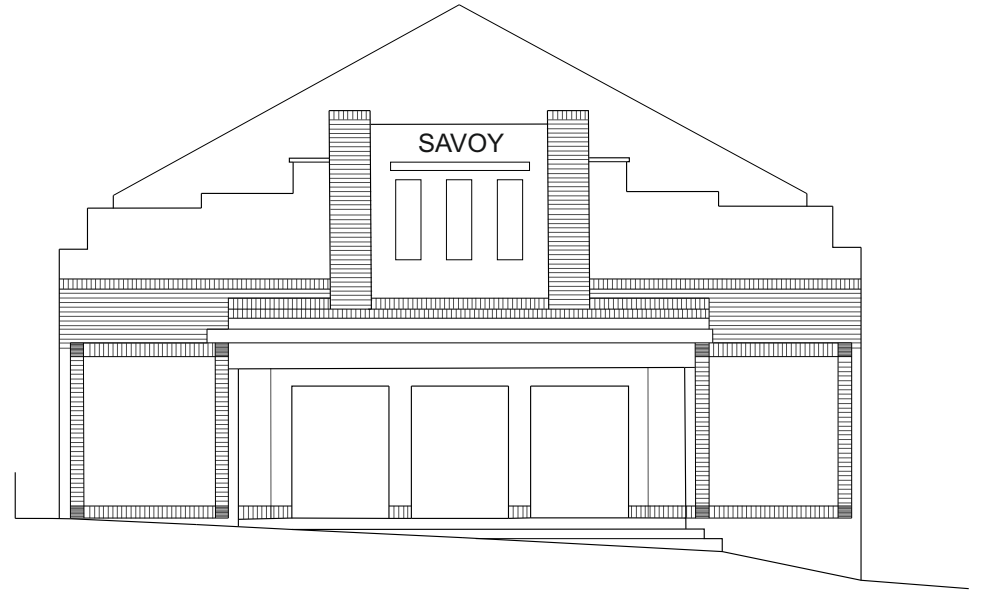
Fig. 1: Site location



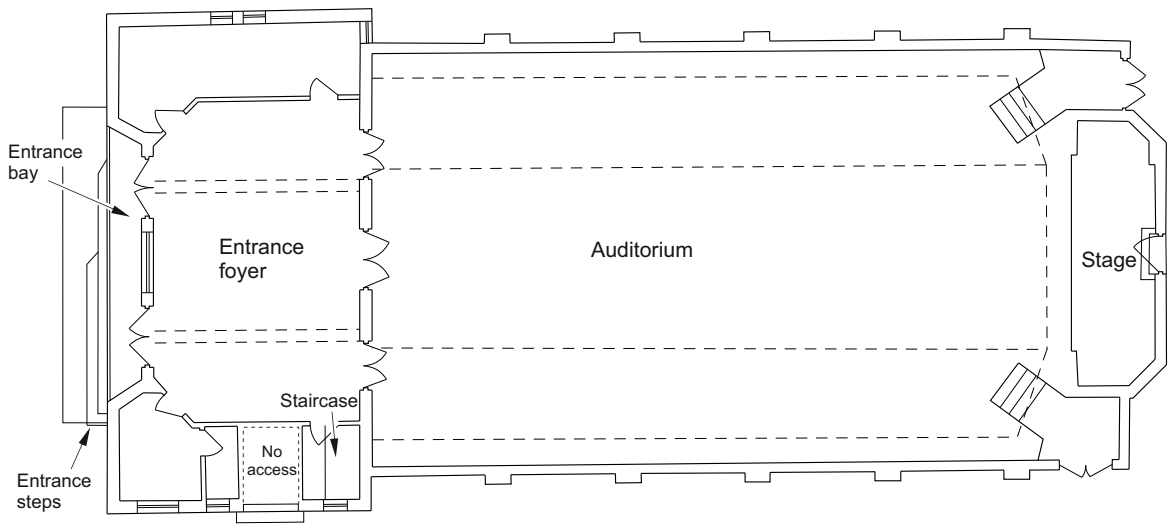
First-floor plan



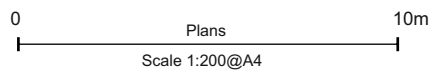
Front elevation



Ground-floor plan



--- Roof/ceiling details



PROJECT

The Old Savoy Cinema, New Road, South Molton, Devon

TITLE

Fig. 2: Plans and elevation





Plate 1: West exterior elevation, looking east-north east. (2m scale)



Plate 2: North exterior elevation, west end, looking south-southeast. (1m scale)



Plate 3: South and west exterior elevations, looking northeast. (2m scale)



Plate 4: East exterior elevation, looking west



Plate 5: View of foyer, looking north-northwest



Plate 6: Detail of the north side entrance doorway into the foyer, looking west-southwest



Plate 7: Detail of an Art Deco door handle in the foyer





Plate 8: Detail of ceiling light fixture in the foyer



Plate 9: Detail of staircase to the first floor from the southeast room of the foyer, looking north



Plate 10: The Auditorium, looking west-southwest (2m scale)



Plate 11: The Auditorium, looking east-northeast.  
(2m scale)



Plate 12: Detail of the fly space, north side of the stage,  
looking northeast



Plate 13: Detail of winding handle in stage area for fly  
over wires and pulleys



Plate 14: First-floor corridor, view of door to roof terrace, looking north-northwest. (2m scale)



Plate 15: View from the first-floor corridor of windows in west elevation and original Art Deco style wall paint, looking west-southwest. (1.2m scale)



Plate 16: Detail of metal sliding doors at the north end of the west elevation of the projector room, looking west. (2m scale)





Plate 17: East end of the north elevation of the projector room, looking north. (2m scale)



Plate 18: The two 35mm Gaumont Kalee projectors, looking east-northeast. (2m scale)



Plate 19: The two arc rectifiers in the southwest corner of the projector room, looking west-southwest. (1.4m scale)



Plate 20: The concrete slab constructed in lieu of foundation trenches, looking southeast

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