

6 March 2025

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Principal Heritage Permits
Heritage Victoria
Department of Transport & Planning

Re: Athenaeum, 28-36 Ocean Beach Road, Sorrento (VHR H2227)
Permit Application P40477

This letter was prepared on behalf of the owners of the Athenaeum in relation to the permit application for demolition of an internal staircase (P40477). A Request for Further Information was issued on 21 February 2025 to advise that, should removal of stairs be approved, the following mitigation measures would need to be implemented via conditions of permit:

- *Full recording of the stair (photographic and measured drawings).*
- *Interpretation in the same location including partial retention of the stairs.*
- *Introduction of a covenant requiring the staircase to be rebuilt in the same location if access to the upper floor is altered from neighbouring property and no structure of similar size to the current structure (excluding a compliant stair) to be built in this location in the future.*

Further to the above, a request has been made to provide a letter/HIS addendum addressing issues discussed to date, including mitigating measures listed above. These matters are addressed as follows.

As discussed at the meeting on 11 February of this year, the permit applicant has for the past four years been unable to secure a tenant for the ground floor retail space. While prospective tenants have praised the appearance of the restored auditorium, they have provided consistent feedback to the effect that the staircase makes the space unsuitable for retail use. Renders presented at the meeting were instructive in demonstrating the adverse visual impacts of the staircase in obstructing clear sightlines from the store frontage through to the auditorium.

The now long running difficulties in finding a tenant demonstrate that a refusal of the application will affect the reasonable and economic use of the place.

The permit applicant is committed to the preparation of an archival record (in the form of photographs and measured drawings) and the creation of an interpretative display retaining part of the original stairs, in the original location, augmented by markings on the floor tracing out the plan form of the stairs – as shown in the indicative renders prepared by the project architect. The potential arrangements for securing future access to the first floor are discussed in the letter prepared by DeGroup, submitted in conjunction with this letter.

The combination of the archival record, the interpretative stair display and legal/planning mechanisms to maintain access to the first floor are sufficient to mitigate the relatively modest heritage impacts of the demolition of the stair.

As discussed in the Heritage Impact Statement submitted with the permit application, the stairs do not demonstrate aspects of historical or architectural significance that are the basis of the place's inclusion on the Victorian Heritage Register. The stairs are entirely unrelated to the original use of the place as a regional theatre and are not directly associated with any of the other entertainment functions provided to holiday makers, most notably the cinema. Nor do the stairs form part of the largely intact original ornate interior with Moderne remodelling described in the statement of significance. The generic detailing of the stairs in no way speaks to the role of Sorrento as a premier seaside resort.

In conclusion, I trust that the further information provided at this time, including this letter, the letter from DeGroup, and the architect's images of the interpretative display have provided a sufficient response to the matters raised in the RFI.

Martin Turnor
Associate Director
Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd