



150-2 ELIZABETH ST, SYDNEY

# Australian Hall

150-2  
Elizabeth St  
Sydney

HISTORY

## Statement of Significance

The Australian Hall holds social significance for at least three groups of people.

Firstly, the building holds social significance for the Aboriginal People for its role in the 1938 "Day of Mourning" meeting.

This event was the first protest by Aboriginal people for equal opportunities within Australian Society. It was attended by approximately 100 people of Aboriginal Blood and was the beginning of the contemporary Aboriginal Political Movement. Among those who contributed significantly to the movement generally and particularly to the event in the Australian Hall were:

- Mrs Ardler
- J Connelly
- William Cooper

- William Ferguson
- Tom Foster
- Pearl Gibbs
- Helen Grosvenor
- Jack Johnson
- Jack Kinchela
- Bert Marr
- Pastor Doug Nicholls
- Henry Noble
- Jack Patten
- Tom Pecham
- Frank Roberts
- Margaret Tucker

Secondly, it holds significance for the German and Greek-Cypriot communities in Sydney as it allowed visitors and migrants to enjoy cultural and social events.

The building also has an association with Australian national and political history in its ownership (1920-79) by the

Knights of the Southern Cross, a Catholic fraternal lay group linked with the Catholic Right and, ultimately with the split in the Labor Party in the 1950s.

The building was initially built to be used as a meeting place for cultural and social activities and was continuously used for these events including cinema and theatre. It is a rare example of a purpose built building in Sydney continuously used for its initial purpose.

The building holds architectural significance as it still contains some examples of original architecture. It is a good example of the Federation Romanesque style. The interior also contains examples of certain features that could date from the original construction and also has features from each of the renovations since.



## Description

**Designer/Maker:** G.L. Grant

**Builder/Maker:** J. Ptolemy

**Construction Year:** 1912

### Exterior

The building was constructed on the full site area, with three storeys above ground plus a basement. It has facades to Elizabeth Street and Nithsdale Street.

The Elizabeth Street facade has a suspended steel awning with its fabric still intact. The facade has the characteristics of Federation Free Style architecture. In consistency with the style, it features two contrasting materials, face brick and rusticated sandstone. The sandstone has all been painted and the brick left unpainted.

There are three entrances. The cinema entrance has marble steps and timber floors which are glazed. The club entrance has terrazzo steps with an aluminium edge strip. The club doors are of solid timber. The fire exit, constructed during the 1980s, has white terrazzo steps and a standard fire door.

The Nithsdale Street Facade walling is rendered and painted. The two windows at the second floor have segmental arched face brick heads. Two windows behind the Mandolin cinema screen and part of the opening which was probably a fire exit or receiving dock have been bricked up.

The roof is corrugated asbestos above the western part of the building and corrugated iron above the hall.

### Interior

The basement extends for half the depth of the building. The ground along the northern and southern site boundaries is un-excavated at basement level.

The ground and first floors extend the full depth of the site with the former Australian Hall occupying the rear half of the first floor. Main access to the hall is from Elizabeth Street. The second floor extends for half the depth of the site.

Two isolated stairs and one lift provide access to all levels of the building. The lift dates from the 1960s alteration. The stair has terrazzo steps. The other fire stair, located in the former light-well, was constructed in the mid-1980s and has tiled steps.

### Basement

The basement comprises of store rooms, cool rooms and toilets. Cool rooms and store rooms have cement floors and cement rendered walls. Although the spatial arrangement and much of the visible fabric date from later

alterations, some wall sections appear to be original.

### Ground Floor

The main entry to the former Cyprus-Hellene Club opens into a foyer and reception office. The major part of the ground floor is occupied by a large bar/club with games area and a restaurant/auditorium with a small stage and dance floor. Also located on this floor is a kitchen, cool room, toilets, storeroom and an exit passage to Nithsdale Street.

The club premises were completely refitted in the mid-1980s and most of the finishes date from this latest alteration. Original elements include the plastered and painted side walls, recessed alcoves and original ceiling panels.

The main spaces on the ground floor have carpeted floors while the cinema entrance foyer features black and white lino tile flooring, papered wall and a decorative plastered ceiling with cornice and brackets.

### First Floor

The front part of the first floor comprises the board room, snooker room, bar area, a small kitchen and toilets. Original elements include the surviving timber floor structure, the arched and square timber windows to Elizabeth Street and joinery such as frames, shashes, architraves and surviving skirtings.

The rear part of the first floor is occupied by the Mandolin Cinema, the former Australian

Hall. The cinema is accessible by a narrow foyer which is adjacent to the northern wall of the building.

The first floor cinema foyer and amenities retained much of their original features such as the original floor structure, marble stair and billboard frames. The ceiling, cornice frieze and ceiling roses appear to be original too.

The former dance hall, which was adapted to the use as a theatre in 1961 and to the cinema use in 1974, retains much of its original fabrics. These are the wall fabric to the external walls, the surviving original wall detailing such as the blind arches and remaining wall decoration, hidden behind false walling and the suspended ceiling. Other original elements include the timber floor structure, windows in the rear wall, mouldings, skirtings and architraves. However, nothing remains of the original stage.

## Second Floor

The second floor is occupied by a large function room, toilets at the rear, a kitchen and an unused board room along the northern boundary wall. Surviving original fabric includes the timber floor structure, original wall surfaces along the southern and northern walls, timber windows, window joinery, architraves and skirtings. The acoustic tiled suspended ceiling above the board room is ruined. Similarly to the first floor, the finishes and fit out of the toilets dates from an earlier (1970s) alteration.



## History

The land was originally part of two grants. The Elizabeth Street end of the present property was issued to John Wylde on 30 June 1823 and the Nithsdale Street portion was part of a grant to Thomas McVitie on 19 October 1831.

### First Occupancy:

#### Western Portion, Fronting Elizabeth Street

Wylde built a house on his land facing what is today Liverpool St. The land was sold in 1829 to the Sergerson brothers and then re-sold it to John Watson on 18 September 1858.

In 1856 a map of Sydney sketched by Edward Burrow shows only a fence around a property and no sign of the original house built by Wylde.

An 1865 Trigonometrical Survey map shows a building and outhouses on this portion of the site. The house was probably built around 1865 - because the name of John Watson first appears in the Sands Directory in 1866. The house was described in the rates assessment books as 3-storey

building with twelve rooms and a slate roof.

The property was sold to William Chandler Eldridge in March 1885.

The property was purchased by representatives of the German Concordia Club on 14 June 1905. The block bounded by Elizabeth, Nithsdale, Goulburn and Liverpool streets was the focus of the German Community in Sydney. The Concordia Club (founded in 1883) was one of a number of German cultural and social organisations that emerged as German immigration and economic activity expanded.

1905 saw the erection of a hall and club premises. The foundation stone now located at 231 Stanmore Rd, Stanmore carries the date 29 July 1905.

With the outbreak of the plague in The Rocks in 1900 there were calls for reform in Sydney. In 1908 there was the appointment of a Royal Commission for the improvement of the City of Sydney and its Suburbs. The commission recommended the widening of Elizabeth Street.

Prior to the necessary demolition, Milton Kent took photographs of the property. Plans were prepared by G.L. Grant for the replacement of the German Club Concordia and they were approved on 5 December 1910.

#### Eastern Portion, Fronting Nithsdale Street

Thomas McVitie arrived in Australia in 1816. When he died in 1833 his property was

subdivided but only sold once his widow died in 1875.

Two houses were built on this particular grant in the early years. A three-storey mansion fronted Hyde Park and was probably built in the early 1830s. The other house was built on the southern half of the grant. Nithsdale St is named after this Cottage (Nithsdale Cottage) and was built around the 1840s. Described in the 1845 rates assessment records, it appears to have been a stone building with 12 rooms on three floors. These properties also featured a stable and coach house.

The block continued as a subdivision until 1910 when the Council resumed the block.

The Council sold this land to the German Club Concordia on 11 February 1913.

## Erection of the German Concordia Club, 1912

According to the centenary history of the Concordia Club, the new building at 150-152 Elizabeth Street was completed and occupied by March 11, 1912.

The buildings had rooms to be used for social functions and also encased a committee room, bedrooms, bathrooms, stewards quarters, banquet room, and an area for a bar and billiards.

A building on the Nithsdale property was constructed sometime toward the end of 1911, although the property was not sold back to the Concordia until 1913.

It is assumed that this second stage was completed based on mutual trust between the State and Concordia. This building would be known as Australian Hall.

The club was influential to the large German community in Sydney and was the focal point for local and visiting Germans.

In May 1915 the Club along with several other German institutions was closed by the authorities as part of war time security and between 1917-1921, the building was occupied by the Universal Church with a cafe opened on the ground floor.

## Knights of the Southern Cross

Following the war, the German Concordia Club met in 1920 and found they could not pay back interest on the large overdraft. The premises were sold to the Southern Cross Hall Ltd, a company of the Knights of the Southern Cross (KSC).

The KSC promoted Catholic employment prospects, assisted major church functions and maintained a large network of parish branches.

Alterations to the building were made to accommodate an additional entry and a more functional use of large room previously built for the bar and billiards.

The hall on the property officially had its name changed to Australian Hall in 1923 and it was a site for a wide range of popular activities at the time including dancing, cinema shows and live

radio broadcasts from radio station 2UE. Also, the state lotteries were drawn each weekday morning in Australian hall between 1933 and the 1940s.

## 26th January 1938 - "Day of Mourning"

26 January 1938 was the 150th anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet. Australian Hall was used by the Australian Aborigines' League and the NSE Aborigines' Progressive Association for the purpose of a meeting of Aborigines known as the "Day of Mourning" conference.

The conference was the first national Aboriginal civil rights gathering, bringing together around 100 Aboriginal men and women from all over New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

Although in 1938 the conference brought about little change, it was a turning point in the evolution of a national struggle by Aboriginal people to gain full citizens' rights.

The building is very important to the Aboriginal community's sense of its history and their struggle for social justice.

## The Phillip Theatre 1961-1974

The next significant change to the site on Elizabeth Street was the Phillip St theatre. It remodelled the interior of the building to turn it into a theatre capable of seating 453 with a raised area at the back to give a balcony effect.

The Phillip Theatre broke away

from traditional Australian Theatre and became a significant force in Australian theatrical history.

## The Cinema 1974

In the early 1970s the theatre was the only exclusively live theatre remaining in the city, but it was hard to find shows suitable for a venue of its size.

The site became the Rivoli Cinema in 1974.

Changes were made to the auditorium and foyer to make it more of a cinema rather than a live theatre venue.

With Haymarket being identified with the Chinese community, the Rivoli was let to Chinese interests who reopened it in 1976 as the Mandolin Cinema, showing Chinese language films.

## The Cyprus-Hellene Club

In 1979 the Knights of the Southern Cross sold the building to the Cyprus-Hellene Club Ltd. It was a Greek organisation offering cultural and social links for its members. The club was, and still is, instrumental in promoting and maintaining the Cypriot culture in Australia.

The Club have been directly involved with the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia in the support of charitable organisations, particularly those associated with the Greek Welfare Centre. The Cyprus Club owned the property until 1998.

Similarly to previous owners, the Cyprus-Hellene Club used the premises for their cultural and social activities while still sub-letting the old hall, which continued as a cinema with various owners and names until 1988.

Over the years, the building accommodated a restaurant, dining and community facilities and the interior of the building was altered on a number of occasions.

## Labor Party Conferences

The earlier building was the site of the first national conference of the Australian Federal Labor Party, called the "Inter-Colonial Conference of Labour" held in January 1900. The conference formally established a federal party and platform, and adopted the "maintenance of a White Australia" and the "total exclusion of coloured and other undesirable races" as the first plank in the new federal party's "fighting platform" and its "general platform".

In 1965, the current building was the site of the 26th national conference of the Australian Labor Party when it abolished the White Australia policy from its platform.

