

A Jewel in the Crown

How Walter Burley Griffin became involved in the building of municipal incinerators is a fascinating story and one which intrigues visitors to one of his lesser known projects – the Ipswich Incinerator in Queensland. Just as interesting is the journey of this little building.

Built in 1936, the year after Griffin's untimely death, the incinerator remained in use until 1963 and was shortly after condemned to demolition by the Ipswich City Council.

Fortunately, this came to the attention of a group of citizens who united to fight for its survival. Among them were members of the Ipswich Little Theatre Society, founded in 1946, which was searching for a performance space following the closure of the Ipswich Town Hall. The group persuaded the Council to grant a two year lease and the difficult journey of conversion from an incinerator to a theatre began.

The project was led by newly graduated engineer, Ian Pullar who, coincidentally was the grandson of William Murray Pullar, the City Engineer in Essendon at the time of the building of the Moonie Ponds Incinerator. It was he who designed, along similar lines, the building which stands in front of the Essendon incinerator.

Largely due to the efforts of volunteers working tirelessly at weekends, the project culminated in the opening of the Burley Griffin Incinerator Theatre in 1969 and, till this day, remains the home of the very active Ipswich Little Theatre Society.

It is an excellent example of adaptive re-use of an historical building and, in particular, a Burley Griffin incinerator. While there is none of the original machinery that there is in other incinerators, the conversion has had minimal impact on the original structure which makes for easy interpretation from the incinerator that was to the theatre that is.

Every section of the original building is in use as a theatre. We store props and house our lighting and sound room on the tipping floor. The stoking floor still retains the inspection hatches, while the lunch room and superintendent's office are dressing rooms and the bathroom facilities are used for the cast. The lower level provides auditorium, stage and back stage with a fly tower in the void where the hoppers used to be. There are only two breaches in the brick work – a standard door into what is now the auditorium, and a fire escape.

We do not attract funding as we do not own the land, but despite that we have poured in the order of \$3 million into the complex, with the addition of two other buildings on the site. To facilitate audience entry a balcony was built in the 1970s. Since then a courtyard has been attached discreetly on the northern side so as not to detract from the original heritage building. The courtyard bar is a favourite with patrons.

While the Incinerator itself is mainly used by our mainstream senior theatre, in our secondary building we run both a primary and a high school group and another for people with disabilities. Other members perform pantomime for local school children, or perform short plays and serve lunch to groups visiting our heritage site. We also host the longest running drama festival in Australia. The complex is in constant use.

Members of Ipswich Little Theatre are very proud of the fact that we saved the building from demolition and that our continued occupancy has meant that the building has not been subjected to further modifications. We take our heritage responsibilities very seriously, and while we lease the building from Ipswich City Council, our members are responsible for monitoring its day to day maintenance. At a recent meeting with ICC officers we were told, “Nobody looks after a heritage building like Ipswich Little Theatre”.

We go to great lengths to ensure that there is an understanding of the importance of the building architecturally among both our younger members and our patrons. Recently we installed an interpretative panel outlining its history and our two published books, *Rising from the Ashes* and *Burning Brightly* detail Griffin’s work.

We believe Walter Burley Griffin would approve of the second chapter in the life of his beautiful building.

Helen Pullar

Hon. Secretary
Chair of the Burley Griffin Incinerator Building Committee