

A History of the Development of the Walter Burley Griffin Incinerator Theatre Complex in Ipswich, Queensland

In the 1920s, two Melbourne engineers, John Boadle, a Sanitary Engineer for Melbourne City Council and Vasilie Trunoff, a Russian Jewish migrant, independently patented a process for burning municipal garbage efficiently – the reverberatory incinerator. Deciding to collaborate and, with financial support from the entrepreneurial merchant Nisson Leonard-Kanevsky, also a member of the same Russian Jewish community, they formed the Reverberatory Incinerator and Engineering Company (RIECO) in 1929.



Kanevsky seated at his desk in Leonard House

Prior to this, in 1927, an incinerator at Box Hill had been built to a Boadle design. This building still stands – although it is no longer in use – and shows clearly the basic structure of a 'box on a box'. Rubbish was delivered to the top box or tipping floor and dropped into a burning chamber in the lower box.



Burning chamber

Tipping floor

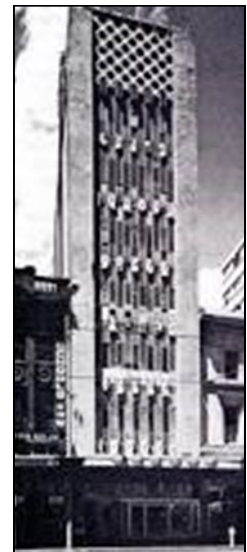
Box Hill Incinerator

Boadle lived Essendon where the local Council was planning to build an Incinerator just as REICo was established.....but no councillor wanted an ugly building in **his** ward. A contract was eventually signed with REICo, dependent on the construction being attractive.

Leonard-Kanevsky assured the councillors that that was no problem. His office suite, Leonard House, built between 1923 and 1924 had been designed by a pretty competent architect whose office was also in the building — none other than the designer of Australia's national capital, Canberra.



Griffin,
Kanevsky
and
Boadle



Leonard House designed by Walter Burley Griffin in 1924 – a reinforced concrete and glass curtain walled building

Griffin, after winning an international competition for the design of Canberra, had moved with his wife Marion Mahoney to Australia.



Federal Capital Design Competition of 1911

won by Walter Burley Griffin whose wife Marion prepared the exquisite drawings



As well as overseeing the building of Canberra , the Griffins established private practices. In Melbourne Griffin took as a partner Eric Nicholls. After their initial success, they struggled through the Depression years and by the time he was invited by Kanevsky to join RElCo, Griffin was grateful to accept this fairly mundane work.



Eric Nicholls

Consequently, Essendon Council accepted the RElCo proposal and Griffin and Nicholls proceeded to design and construct a number of incinerators including the one at Essendon which, while bigger, displays some similar features to ours.



Essendon Incinerator which today functions as an Arts Centre

At one of these, Waratah in Newcastle, the Sanitary Inspector was Bob Rogers. Soon after Bob Rogers accepted a similar position with the Ipswich City Council.

We assume that Bob Rogers was instrumental in persuading the Ipswich City Council to engage RIECo to build our city incinerator. The plaque unveiled on opening day has all the important names in our story: DESIGNED & ERECTED BY THE REVERBERATORY INCINERATOR AND ENGINEERING CO. SYDNEY; WB GRIFFIN EM NICHOLLS G BROCKWELL GILL ARCHITECTS; RC ROGERS CITY INSPECTOR



And so Ipswich, as a result, has the only Burley Griffin building in Queensland. Griffin, however, was never to see the Ipswich Incinerator because he left for Lucknow India before it was built and died there two years later from peritonitis

The building was officially opened on 5 November 1936 and although an industrial incinerator it had several lovely features – the orange and mulberry bricks, the open fret work and the art deco chevron shapes.

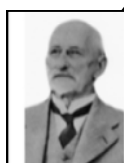
A very official Official Opening -
5 November 1936



Seen here from the back, it had been completed at a Cost of £5,579 - \$500,000 in today's money.



Construction was supervised by local architect George Brockwell Gill



Designed for a city population of 20,000, it was of a building with only one chimney and one burning chamber, but with the capacity for duplication.

In this picture, men are working from the single burning chamber. The absence of the stairs to the right of the picture shows that the incinerator was in operation before the official opening.



Note the horse & rubbish cart



The absence of the second burning chamber can be seen more clearly in this photograph. Note also the rock outcrop very close to the wall of the incinerator and the absence of the flue in front of the door.



This photograph, taken from where the animal enclosure is now, shows even more clearly the rock outcrop and the single chimney.

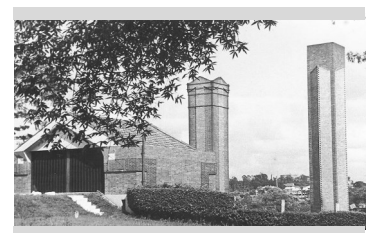
The Incinerator operated with great efficiency but the population grew.



So in 1940, the second burning chamber and chimney were added.

By then Burley Griffin had died, so the new works were designed by his Melbourne partner Eric Nicholls.

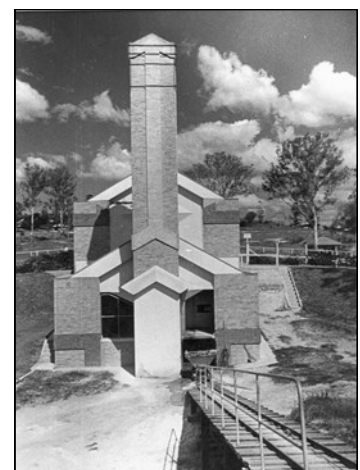
The second chimney is markedly different in style.



The Incinerator operated five days a week Monday to Friday. The rubbish was brought up what is now Burley Griffin Drive, driven into the top area and tipped into the hoppers over what is now the stage. From there it was released gradually into the burning chambers located in what is now the auditorium.

Any rubbish not burnt passed through openings in the floor into small trucks which were moved along a railway line to an elevated hopper in the grounds close to where we later built the Jean Pratt Building.

From time to time, the Council moved this rubbish by truck to landfill. Many of the ovals in the city are underlain by the unconsumed rubbish





The hopper shown in this newspaper clipping was removed by Ipswich City Council in 1983 because of danger



By the early 1960s, the population of Ipswich had grown to such an extent that the incinerator had insufficient capacity and after a quarter of a century of operation it required extensive refurbishment. By now, it had also become unfashionable to burn rubbish which caused air pollution so the Council of the day decided to close the facility in 1962. All the metal fittings were removed and sold for scrap and the building was abandoned.

Over the next few years it became a haven for derelicts. Ceramic roof tiles were smashed, windows broken and it was an unsafe playground for local children.

Unable to find a use for the building and unprepared to spend money on maintenance, the Council resolved to demolish it.

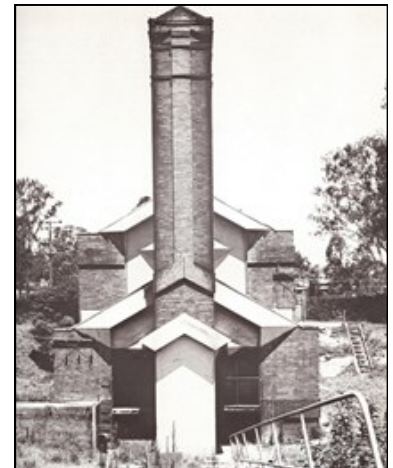
This decision did not go down well with groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Institute of Architects who protested that the only Burley Griffin building in Queensland should be preserved. Public meetings, including a symposium chaired by architect Jim Birrell from the University of Queensland, were held. The Council bent to public pressure and agreed not to demolish the building, provided it could be put to use. The Ipswich Branch of the Arts Council was granted a short-term lease.

The problem was, however, what could be done with the building.

The interior had low ceilings, soot stained walls, holes in the floor and a large concrete hopper supported by two massive reinforced concrete columns. Meetings of some societies were held there, as were a couple of art and pottery classes, but none was very satisfactory or likely to provide long-term use.

It was suggested that it could be turned into a theatre by knocking out the wall at the chimney end! The organising secretary of Arts Council, Uletta Paterson, took up the cudgels and was elected President of ILT in January 1967 with a view to persuading the society to convert the building to a theatre. Over the next two years, ILT members pondered the problem of whether and how the building could be converted.

In the meantime, the Town Hall in which we had performed since 1946 was deemed no longer fit for that purpose — if indeed it had been for many years.



Abandoned and unloved in the 1960s



The stage of the Town Hall, now the Ipswich Art Gallery

Council decided to close the Town Hall and build a new Civic Centre, but that took five years. ILT knew something had to be done about a performance venue. If the incinerator could be converted, not only would it provide a home but, it would save an iconic and rare building



Ian Pullar had joined ILT at the same meeting that Uletta Patterson became President. He was one of those who wrestled with the conversion problem. The main difficulty was the supporting column which would have been in the centre of the proscenium. As a newly graduated Civil Engineer, Ian solved the problem, and moved at the January 1969 AGM "that the Society collaborate with Arts Council to convert the Burley Griffin Incinerator Building into an intimate theatre."

We had a total of \$1200 in kitty after 23 years of operation.

A body named the Ipswich Cultural Centre was set up to undertake the conversion with three representatives from each of Arts Council and Ipswich Little Theatre. ILT's representatives were Ian Pullar, Clive Beale and Walter Ryan.



Ian



Clive



Walter

Work took place throughout 1969 with the aim of having the Incinerator available for use as soon as possible after the Town Hall closed. So, plans were drawn up, approvals were obtained. Contractor Henk Groenenberg was employed ...

... and the first of many volunteer working bees were held.



The major features of the work were the removal of the column and the installation of the proscenium arch, provision of public toilets in the mezzanine level (at Council insistence that everything had to be inside), entrance stairs, stage furniture and a basic lighting and sound deck.



The front entrance

In November 1969, we held an official opening of the Incinerator Theatre with Alan Edwards, newly appointed Artistic Director of the Royal Queensland Theatre Company, officiating.



IPSWICH CULTURAL CENTRE

THIS BURLEY GRIFFIN INCINERATOR BUILDING

WAS OPENED AS A THEATRE

BY ALAN EDWARDS OF QUEENSLAND THEATRE COMPANY

ON 22ND. NOVEMBER, 1969.

TO MARK THE COMPLETION OF THE CONVERSION,

THIS PLAQUE WAS UNVEILED BY

ULETTA PATERSON

FOUNDATION CHAIRMAN OF THE CENTRE,

Conditions were extremely primitive.

The audience sat on hired chairs on a flat floor — the holes having been filled in by the Army Reserve next door — and stage lights were made from jam tins.

But the public, perhaps attracted by the novelty, supported us and we began the long journey of continuous development.

Before long we introduced the “rent-a-play” scheme which is still our bread and butter.

For the next four years we celebrated the anniversary of the opening of the Incinerator Theatre with a performance in the grounds. The actors performed on the flue between the two chimneys. Note: no courtyard.



In 1971 we installed roller doors on the storage level (to conceal our flats and other props).

We also installed a ceiling in the auditorium to deaden the noise of rain on the pressed aluminium tiles.



Then in 1975 we had sufficient funds, supplemented by a contribution from the Whitlam government, to build the entrance balcony. The slab was poured on the Wednesday and we performed on the Saturday. But this was the last of these external performances — we decided competing with summer rains when we had a perfectly dry interior was not wise.



At the same time as we installed the entrance balcony, we cut and filled a small area to the side of the building — the start of our courtyard and in 1976 we acquired the seats from the old Avon Cinema and had them cut into banks of chairs and re-covered. We then engaged a builder to install the first platforms to provide tiered seating in the auditorium.

In that same year the driveway was paved.

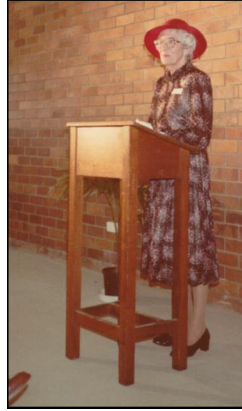


In 1981 we created a doorway entrance to the auditorium from the courtyard — the first cut into the fabric of the original building. It was also in that year that we made the second and last such intrusion when the ladies’ dressing room door was cut to allow the first fire escape to be built.



By now space was stretched to capacity with demands from senior theatre, Junior Theatre and Young Theatricals but by 1982 we had accumulated enough funds—mainly with proceeds from the annual Theatre Restaurant seasons— to construct another building on the site. This was designed by architect Graham Killoran, who was a member at the time and when we were unable to obtain an affordable quotation for the works, Graham also became the builder, using sub-contractors.

The Jean Pratt Building was opened on 23 October 1982 and named in honour of that most valuable Life Member who had kept the theatre afloat through the difficult final years in the old Town Hall. It was funded from our resources, a State Government subsidy and, even then, loans from members.



The Jean Pratt Building. The old hopper can be seen in the foreground.

In 1983 the balcony and courtyard were paved and then the paved area was extended in 1987 and the covering modified and reroofed



1991 and 92 saw the installation of a concrete slab and roof at the back of the Jean Pratt Building.

This was later screened but was a hot space in Summer and Freezing in Winter

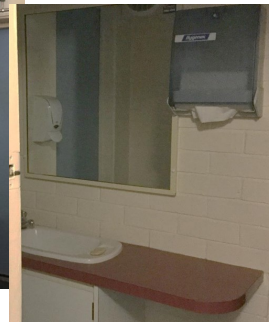
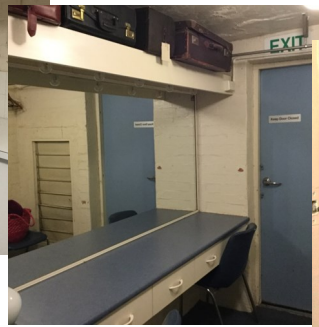


The incinerator itself still had public toilets inside only and the extremely limited backstage kitchen space. Something had to be done! Once again the bureaucratic red tape took years to cut through. Plans and approvals were eventually obtained for an amenities block, but in the meantime the cost had gone up so the 50% subsidy we started with became less than 40%. The total cost was \$130,000 and the subsidy was \$44,000. So, again we borrowed money. The building was completed in 1994. How did we ever manage without it?



Outside toilets and kitchen in 1994

In 1995, now that the backstage area was solely the preserve of performers, the upstairs toilets and dressing rooms and the green room and kitchen were remodelled.



In 1998, the Council undertook repairs to the main chimney and the deteriorating rock walls which enabled us to create our beautiful gardens.

In 1999, a storm struck causing major damage, and expense, in our courtyard.



But, undaunted, our efforts continued. Early in the new century the Jean Pratt Building was repainted, carpeted and air-conditioned.



To meet Workplace Health and Safety requirements, the roller doors in the storage area were replaced by a single roller door and a personnel door.




By now the 21st century was having its impact – or was it climate change??

The Incinerator was uncomfortably hot. Try telling that to the men who stoked the fires.

Again we failed to obtain any grant from the Gaming Fund or any other source.

So again, we borrowed from our members and installed air-conditioning in 2004.





Architect Walter Burley Griffin

The Ipswich Incinerator was designed by the renowned Australian architect, Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937).

In 1902, Griffin won an international competition to design Australia's national capital, Canberra. 1905, his wife, fellow architect Marion Mahony Griffin and architect Eric Mitchell, he established a practice in Melbourne. His designs include the Capitol Theatre and National College in Melbourne and the suburbs of Canberra in Sydney.


Griffin was badly affected by the Depression as private commissions dried up. Through his business association

with Nelson Leonard Kennedy, he turned his attention to the design of municipal incinerators.

The Griffin had an innovative approach to industrial architecture. Buildings were to be attractive, have high quality design and fit into their environment. This philosophy is reflected in the design of the building.

In 1905 the Griffin moved to India where Walter unexpectedly died of pneumonia in 1907. So although Griffin designed the Ipswich Incinerator, he never saw it. The construction was supervised by Ipswich architect George Brockleford CBE. The second chimney, added in 1946, was designed by Eric Mitchell.

The Ipswich Incinerator is the only work in Queensland by Walter Burley Griffin.



Ipswich's Reverberatory Incinerator


What is a Reverberatory Incinerator?

In the 1900s, Ipswich City Council needed to replace its unsightly municipal rubbish tip with an incinerator designed by Burley Griffin for the Reverberatory Incinerator Company. The company built 16 individual incinerators in Australia, 13 of which were designed by Griffin and Mitchell.


The reverberatory technique, invented by Australian engineer John Franklin, heated the waste to 650-1300°C. The hot gases of combustion were deflected or reverberated through the rubbish as they fell in to be burned. This method achieved maximum flame and molten, producing less waste were disposed.

Rubbish was dumped from trucks (originally dumping into bays) by means from the level. The rubbish from the level was the steel 'bed' (which) lay on the frames on the ground floor. Below the ground floor (rubbish chamber), the ash and clinker were collected in a mobile tray to be removed.

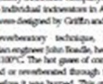
The Ipswich Incinerator, opened on 7 November 1906, provided the most efficient, hygienic, and economical method of garbage disposal available.



Operation of the Incinerator (1905-1901)



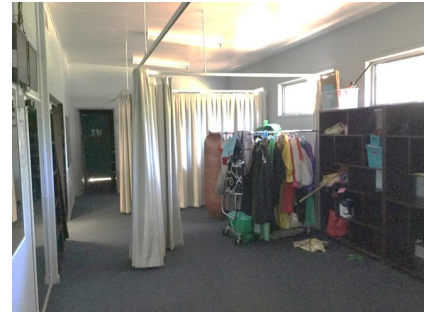
Operation of the Incinerator (1969 - present day)



Operation of the Incinerator (1905-1901)

Despite the modifications to the back of the Jean Pratt Building, the user groups continued to experience difficulties, especially the S-Troupers in wheel chairs.

Architect Andrew Solomon was engaged to design an Annexe for us which we installed in 2010 at a cost of around \$180,000



This was again financed by borrowing around half the cost from members. To our great credit, the loans were repaid in two years.



The Jean Pratt Building with its new annexe

In 2011 we paid a professional firm more than \$30,000 to refurbish the entire stage area – new battens...



....and borders, new side legs and new front curtain.



Over the years, thanks probably to birds, our central chimney has grown trees. On at least two occasions the Council had hired a large crane and had sent workers up in a cage to remove or poison the fig tree growths that threatened the brickwork.



The trees continued to grow and expert advice was sought. In early 2012 scaffolding was erected around the chimney. The trees were removed and a concrete dome was installed so that rain would wash seeds away. The work was timely as some of the brick joints, which are normally 5 mm wide had opened up to 50 mm!



50 mm (2 inch) gap

About this time in an effort to keep our patrons dry, a “temporary” canopy was erected in the courtyard. This was aesthetically unpleasing and reduced the available space. Building Committee became even keener than before to replace it and the very ordinary—even if functional—pergola.

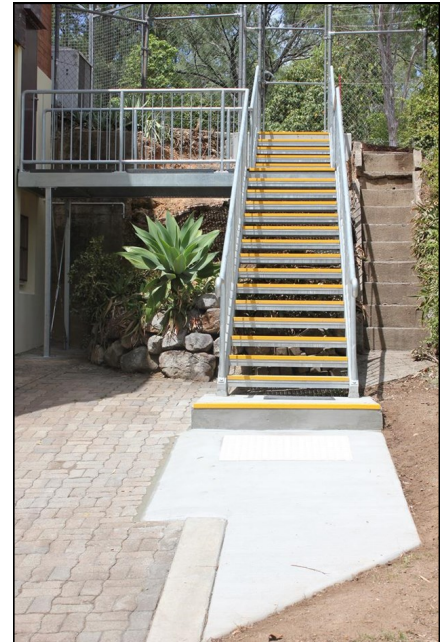


So in 2012, planning began in earnest for a roof over the courtyard. Previous designs had not been acceptable and Andrew Solomon was again engaged to design a covering for us: the start of a long process.

In 2013 the Council, who had been concerned about the non-compliance of the fire escape, undertook to demolish the old and install a new one.



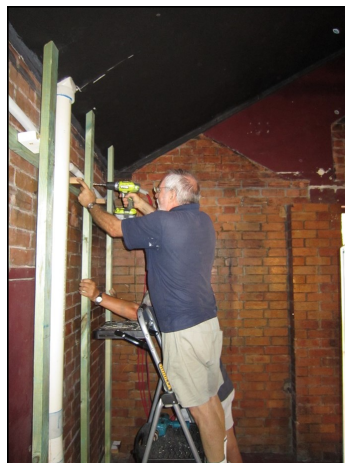
It was completed in 2014 and we stabilised and replanted the bank behind with a donation from Bunnings.



At about the same time the courtyard furniture was replaced with aluminium tables and chairs.



And then work commenced (particularly by Col and Ian) to refurbish and re-wire the auditorium at a cost of approximately \$20000.



By 2015, the plans for the new roof were finalised but funding was a problem as the cost was expected to be great — and escalating as time went by. The committee took the courageous decision to proceed using the usual mixture of accumulated funds and loans from members. Funds were also sought from other sources, but Federal and State politicians failed to deliver. Ipswich City Council contributed \$25,000 to the cost which reached almost \$400,000. This included design and endless approval fees and the completely unexpected cost over-run through having to remove and replace the concrete slab.



As an extra bonus, the pergola which had been removed from the courtyard was recycled to provide a wet weather/shady entrance to the Jean Pratt Building, again by voluntary labour.



The roof structure and the new concrete were built by contractors, working around ILT's play seasons, between March and July 2016.



The finishing touches to the courtyard were supplied by the usual voluntary labour.



In October 2016, ILT held a function to celebrate 80 years since the Incinerator was built, 70 years since ILT was founded and the “raising of the roof”.

We estimate that, by the end of 2016 we would have spent, the values of that year, around \$3 million of our own with very limited contributions from outside sources.