

# Visualising the Victoria: digital reconstruction of Newcastle's heritage-listed Victoria Theatre, 1891

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## ABSTRACT

'Visualising the Victoria' is part of a national research project (under the auspice of [AusStage](#)) that is seeking to find new ways of understanding lost theatre spaces through digital visualisation of historic/archival data. Theatre is a visual and aural medium that is experienced through the body of the present observer in real time. Seeking to preference the visual/aural experience over text-based outcomes, this project is predicated on the concept that theatre buildings can be 'read' and re-understood as places of shared cultural meaning. Supported by visual materials from various points in the research, this paper explicates the processes of the 'Visualising the Victoria' project.

Newcastle's Victoria Theatre in Perkins Street was built in 1891 and is the oldest theatre building in New South Wales. It ceased operating as a theatre in 1966, was re-purposed as a retail space for nearly forty years and has lain derelict for a further twenty years. Built and maintained as a commercial enterprise by the independent Victoria Theatre Company, the theatre was, when it first opened in 1891, a magnificent example of late-Victorian theatre architecture. Leading architects, builders, and interior decorators of the day were employed to create a resilient and beautiful landmark building for Newcastle and throughout its first decade of operation, mostly comic entertainments were staged there, ranging across the spectrum of melodrama, musical comedy, comic opera, variety, music concerts and drama. It was a location for civic pride and a significant marker of Newcastle's importance as a destination for international and national touring theatre companies and entertainers.

The Victoria Theatre has undergone numerous renovations and makeovers that removed most traces of the original. The stage house is of the same dimensions as when first built, as is the architectural footprint. The roof of the auditorium was raised in one of the twentieth century renovations, but nothing else appears as it did when the theatre first opened. As a result of numerous alterations, all intended to 'modernise' the theatre and equip it as a hybrid venue for both live performance and movie screening, knowledge about the way the theatre looked inside when it first opened in 1891 has been lost; there are no photographs or drawings of its original stage, proscenium, auditorium, dress circle and upper gallery, halls, staircases, lighting sources, or the highly coloured neo-Grecian decorations that were a particular feature of the original.

Bringing to light the investigative processes engaged to a) first discover the Victoria's architecture, interior design, and performance history, and b) to then render the research data in several different digital formats, this paper also discusses a serendipitous example of interdisciplinary research-led practice that drew industry stakeholders and community interest into the orbit of the project. It reveals how the idea of visualising Newcastle's Victoria Theatre inspired and caught the imagination of researchers and creatives from Creative and Performing Arts, Natural History Illustration, Cultural History, Music, and VR at the University of Newcastle, and how this e-research outcome is impacting the future of New South Wales' oldest theatre.



Figure 1: Victoria Theatre 1891 (credit: Stephanie Holm and Gillian Arrighi, UON)



Figure 2: Victoria Theatre 1891 (credit: Stephanie Holm and Gillian Arrighi, UON)



Figure 3: Victoria Theatre 1891 (credit: Stephanie Holm and Gillian Arrighi, UON)