



Bill Leighton

(RAIA c.1950, Hobbs Winning Leighton & Partners brochure c.1974)

William Thomas Leighton (1905-1990) was born 15 July 1905 at Fremantle, the son of James and Margaret (nee Howard) who had married at Fremantle in 1895. With a brother and three sisters, Bill was the youngest of five children, all relatively young when saddened by the death of their father in 1917. Continuing the strong local associations of the Leighton family, in 1921 Bill was articled under Joe Allen and Claude Nicholas at Allen & Nicholas in Fremantle, and gained his initial architectural training. Leighton was subsequently employed at Eales & Cohen, where he enjoyed working with the pugnacious W.G. (Bill) Bennett. Passing the requisite examinations, Bill registered with the Architects Board of Western Australia (reg no. 111) in December 1926, and then completed post-graduate studies in Sydney (1927-1928) including work in atelier under Professor Leslie Wilkinson and art under Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo.

In 1928 Leighton was offered employment with Bohringer Taylor & Johnson on the Ambassadors Theatre in Perth, a building he was to 'modernize' in the next decade. Recognizing the precocious architect, Charles Bohringer (1891-1962) then encouraged Bill to assist with the construction of the State Theatre in Melbourne, following which he was sent to Auckland to complete the Civic Theatre. It has been noted that he also completed a number of industrial buildings in New Zealand before moving to Sydney. By this time Leighton's major interests lay with the cinema projects, and in 1933 he was responsible for much of the design of the Embassy Theatre in Sydney, followed by modern renovations to the Mayfair in 1934. Although closed as a cinema in 1956, the Hoyts Theatre in Newtown remains as an early example of Leighton's Art Deco remodeling work in Sydney and is an interesting forerunner to later work in WA.

Bill Leighton returned to WA in 1936, and soon took over leadership of the architectural students' design class that K.M. Forster (1907-1967) had initiated in 1934. Bill was working with Alfred Richard Baxter-Cox, later in partnership. His professional reputation in WA was established on the basis of the buildings he designed whilst in this partnership in the late 1930s, especially the distinctive Inter-War Art Deco style cinemas. The most notable of Leighton's cinemas still standing is the Piccadilly Theatre and Arcade, built for the entrepreneur Claude de Bernales in 1938. Within a six-month period, he also designed the Windsor Theatre in Nedlands and the Cygnet (Como) in South Perth. Other designs at this time, some being a remodelling in modern style, included the Astor Theatre in Mt Lawley, work at the City of Perth featuring the Royal and Ambassadors Theatres in central Hay Street, the Grand Theatre in Murray Street (all now demolished); Fremantle's Princess Theatre and the Lyric in Bunbury.

The highlight of Leighton's work in this busy period was the Metro Theatre in William Street, demolished for construction of offices in the early 1970s. His last pre-war commission was the refurbishment of the Plaza Theatre in central Hay Street. Other buildings directly attributed to Bill are Devon House (1937) in central Hay Street, Perth and the Agriculture Building at the University of Western Australia (1938), but both while working with Baxter-Cox.

By mutual consent, the partnership with Baxter-Cox was dissolved on 11 November 1939, and both men took up service in the Second World War. Following the cessation of hostilities, Leighton obtained a post in the architectural division of the Public Works Department, leaving after having been invited to become a partner with Athol Hobbs (1899-1979) and Alex Winning (1892-1963) in the new firm Hobbs, Winning & Leighton from 1946.

Although perhaps best-known in WA for his Art Deco cinema designs of the 1930s, in his later years Leighton maintained that his most significant works were the Fremantle Passenger Terminal and nearby Fremantle Port Authority Building, designed in the early 1960s. Also in the early 1960s, the design and construction of new premises for Hobbs, Winning & Leighton at 37 Ord Street, West Perth (ironically built on the site of a house occupied by architect Jack Ochiltree for over forty years) was a major statement of Hobbs, Winning & Leighton's prominence and of its modern design-ethos in the period.

He retired in 1975, when Hobbs Winning Leighton and Partners had around seventy persons employed, with a branch office at Albany. At that time there were six partners, six associates, an engineer and an interior designer listed on the company prospectus. Under Bill's and the other partners' guidance, Hobbs Winning Leighton and Partners practiced prolifically and with distinction for over five decades, and with the creation of a Sydney office in 1989, became Hobbs Winning Australia. At the very end of the twentieth century, the business was absorbed by the Woods Bagot company.

A major contributor to professional affairs, Bill was twice WA Chapter President of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (1951-1952, 1963-1964), a federal councilor for 13 years, and a long-term member of the Architects Board of WA. With respect to his private life, Bill had married Miriam Olga Wight at Fremantle in 1928. Bill's son Garry Howard Leighton registered with the ABWA in 1956 (reg no. 300), and in his career also practiced with Hobbs Winning Leighton & Partners. Bill Leighton died at his Dalkeith home on 11 March 1990, aged 84 years, and Olga passed away just nine months later.

References:

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Hobbs Winning & Leighton photographs 1960s-1980s, 82 images by Fritz Kos, online at SLWA.

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Civic Theatre, Auckland completed in 1929 (Wikipedia 2013).



Former Hoyts Theatre in Newtown, Sydney of 1934 (Google 2013).



The remodelled State Theatre, shops and picture garden at the corner of Walcott and Beaufort streets, Mt. Lawley, which will be reopened in about two weeks. The architects are Messrs. Baxter-Cox and Leighton.

State Theatre cnr Walcott & Beaufort Sts Mt Lawley, now the Astor theatre (*The West Australian*, 29 April 1939, p.4).



Bill Leighton explaining drawings by students of Perth Technical College to Sir James Mitchell, Governor of WA, at an exhibition in Perth Town Hall (*The West Australian*, 20 April 1952, p.12).



Fremantle Passenger Terminal 1962 (SLWA 340518PD),



Hobbs Winning & Leighton offices, 37 Ord Street West Perth in 1966 (SLWA 340824PD)