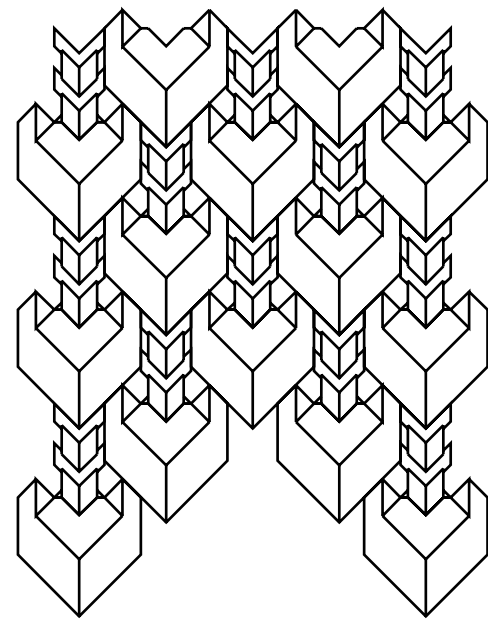


The Capitol Six Degrees Architects

Review by Paul Walker
Photography by Tatjana Plitt



Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin's Capitol Theatre, built in Melbourne in 1924, was unique at the time for its extravagant decor and abstract motifs. After a major 1960s downscaling and a series of ad hoc renovations, it has been re-engineered to beguile audiences for another hundred years.



Built on the land of the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin nation

Melbourne’s Capitol theatre is one of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin’s most notable buildings. The disciplined exterior of a ten-storey office block hides within it what is surely one of the most compelling rooms in Australia. Nothing outside hints at the extravagant decoration of the theatre within: a vast plaster ceiling of v-shaped boxes housing lights that can be varied in colour and intensity. The copiously repeated prismatic forms extend some way down the theatre walls, especially on either side of the rectangular proscenium arch. Entering the space when it is lit takes your breath away. It’s a crystalline cave. The plaster prisms are ranked around tiered plaster rectangles at the scale of the entire room, higher at the middle of the ceiling, so that the whole is a kind of negative of the ziggurats the Griffins favoured for honorific buildings, including Canberra’s unbuilt Capitol.¹

The Capitol (the Melbourne one) was built in 1924 as a cinema and differed from other “atmospheric” cinemas built at the same time in that its extravagant decor was entirely abstract, akin to the theatre projects of German expressionists rather than to anything more local. Although it feels quite contemporary – like an exercise in quasi-fractal geometry by some techno-nerd whizz-kid – it was, in fact, conceived in the old, laborious way. Most of the drawings of the office building and the theatre were initialled by Marion Mahony and a representative of the “architects in conjunction,” Peck and Kempter.²

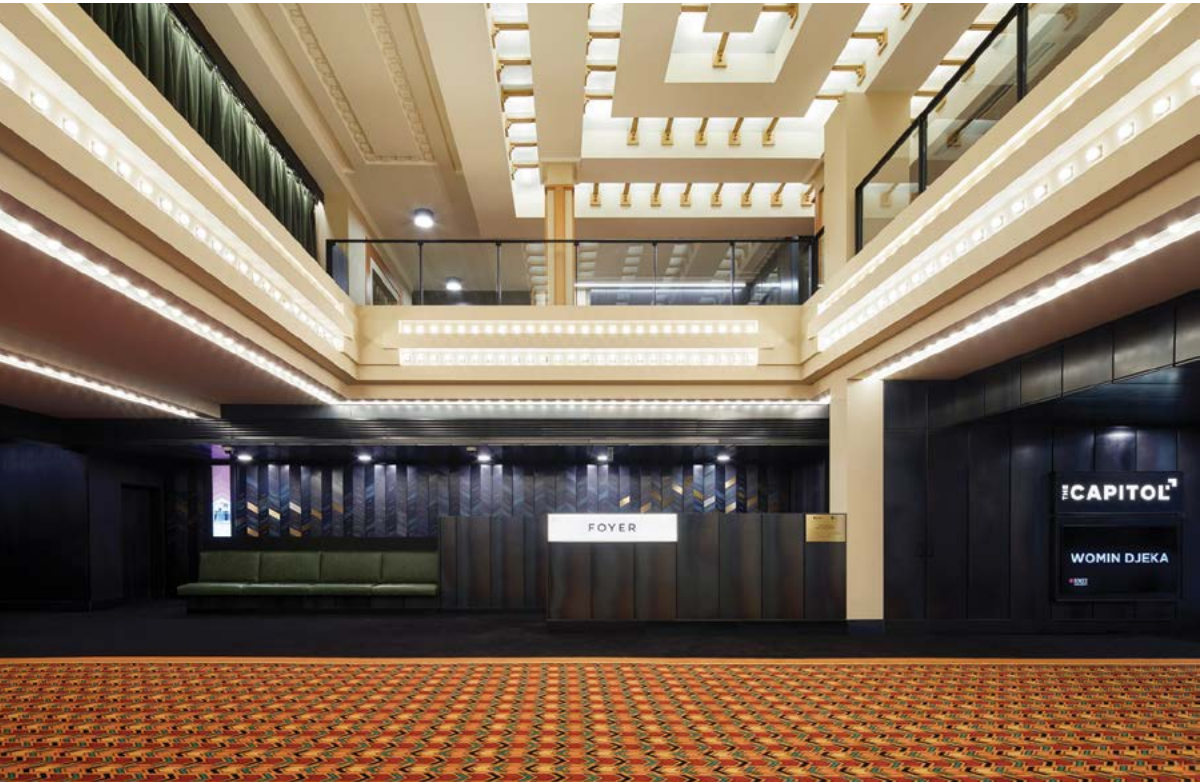
Originally, the Capitol was vast – it held two thousand people. In the 1960s, the stalls level was demolished and replaced by an arcade of shops that runs from Swanston Street to Howey Place at the back of the site. At the dress-circle level, the seating was extended forward to produce the current configuration and the Capitol reopened as a smaller cinema. This change did not affect the ceiling and wall decoration; however, upper-level spaces were closed off and the sweeping stairs to the upper foyer were removed.



In 1999, the Capitol was purchased by RMIT University for use by its College of Business as a large lecture theatre. Work was done by Six Degrees architects to facilitate this. More recently, thoroughgoing renovations have been undertaken, again by Six Degrees in conjunction with heritage architect Michael Taylor, adding facilities to support evening events and performances, and installing new lift services to levels that previously had limited accessibility. Much of the new work is behind the scenes, but a lounge and a whisky room in the upper-level lobby that were closed off in the 1960s have been returned to break-out spaces. They are visually connected by a void and overlook the main foyer below. These reclaimed areas are much more intimate than the theatre space itself and have a related but more modest decorative schema: a stepped ceiling has strips of translucent, back-lit glazing with conspicuous bronzed glazing bars, and the columns and balustrades feature chequered ornamental strips. Like that of the theatre, this ornament is abstract. The survival and recovery of these formerly lost spaces is a small miracle.

In the foyer, only the ceiling is heritage – it echoes the ziggurat ceiling of the theatre, with glazed strips between the stepped plaster rectangles. Although there is little left of the Griffins in this space, Six Degrees has installed a carpet with patterns and colours based on those used originally. The treatment of new foyer elements is otherwise modest: dark steel balustrades, glazing to the ground level below, a marble ticket counter. A wall clad with diagonal steel lozenges – designed by RMIT graphics students under Six Degrees’ guidance – features the names of donors who supported the project. It matches the geometry of the carpet pattern.

Six Degrees’ interventions in the theatre and the reclaimed lounges are also visually restrained. The new theatre seats are upholstered in dark greens (some, in leather, will bear the names of sponsors); the balustrades to the entry stairs are dark grey steel



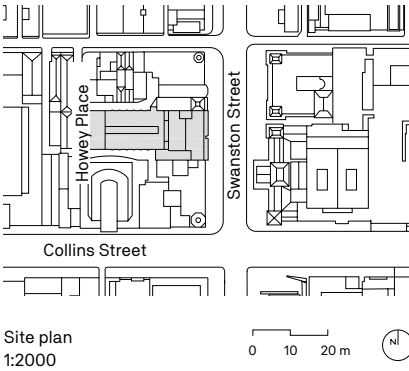
↩ In the foyer, the heritage ceiling echoes the theatre’s ziggurat ceiling, while the new carpet re-creates the patterns and colours of the original.

← The disciplined exterior of a ten-storey office block gives little indication of the extravagant decoration of the theatre within.

↑ Strip lighting, illuminated signage and small mirrored bulkheads along the edges of the concrete ceiling offer modest sparkle to the previously dreary arcade.

→ A wall clad with diagonal steel lozenges – designed by RMIT graphics students under Six Degrees’ guidance – features the names of donors to the project.

The Capitol



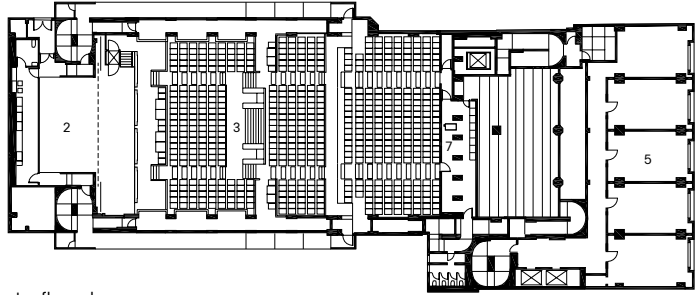
Site plan
1:2000

→ The new elements in the theatre are robust and recessive in order to let the delicate extravagance of the original ceiling shine forth.

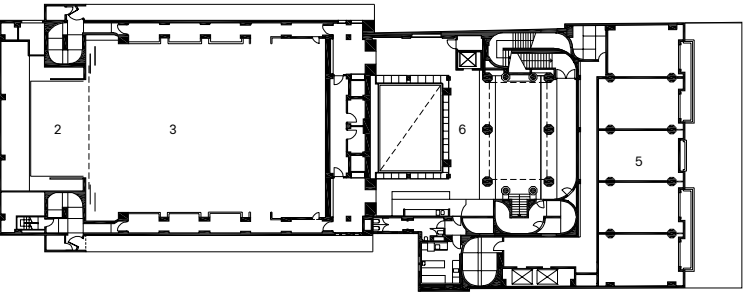
↘ The vast plaster ceiling features copiously repeated prismatic forms, housing lights that can be varied in colour and intensity.

Floor plan key

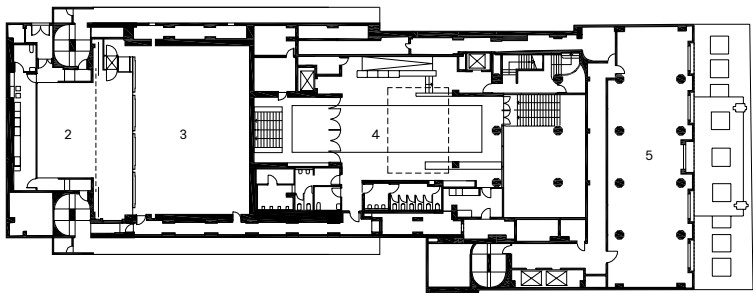
- 1 Arcade
- 2 Stage and flytower
- 3 Theatre
- 4 Level one main foyer
- 5 Residences
- 6 Level two salon
- 7 Digital bio box



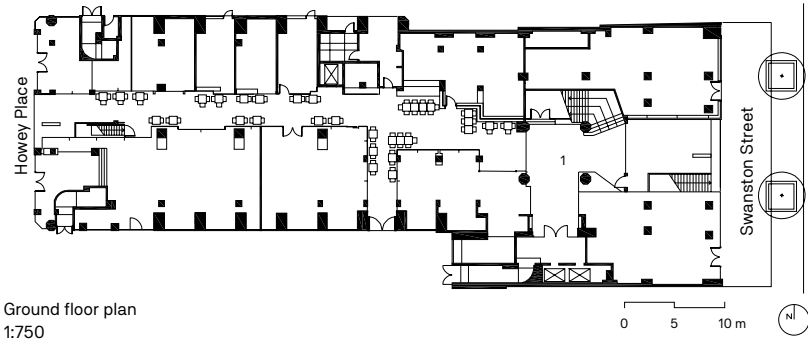
Theatre floor plan
1:750



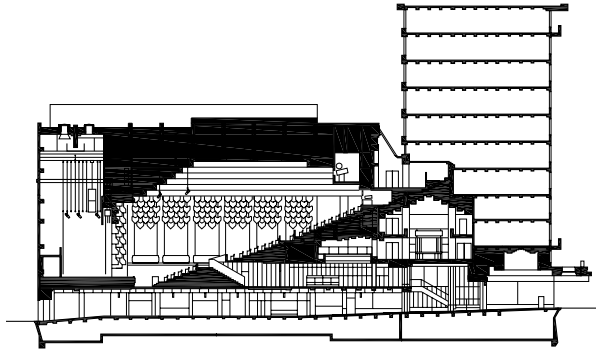
Level two floor plan
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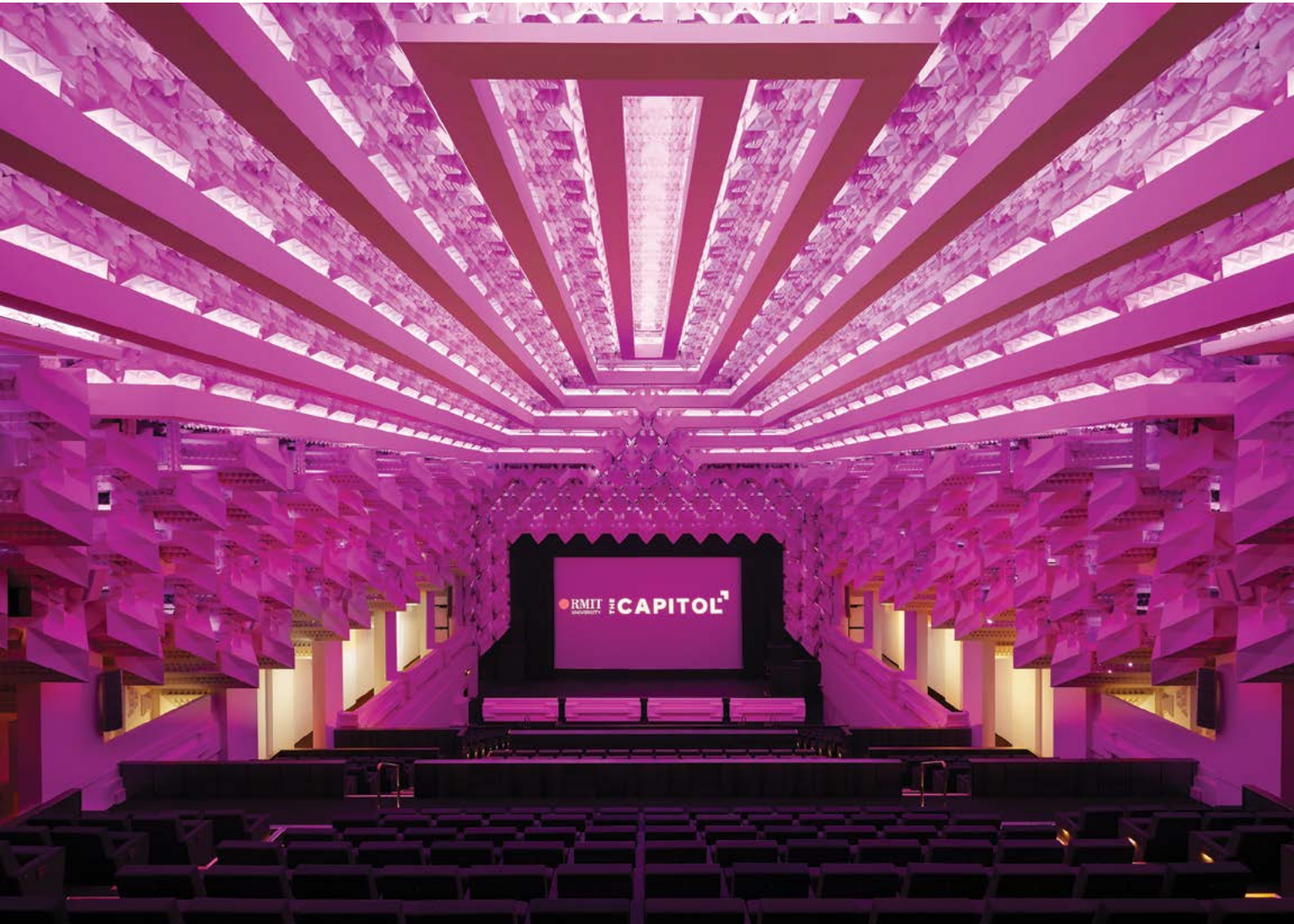
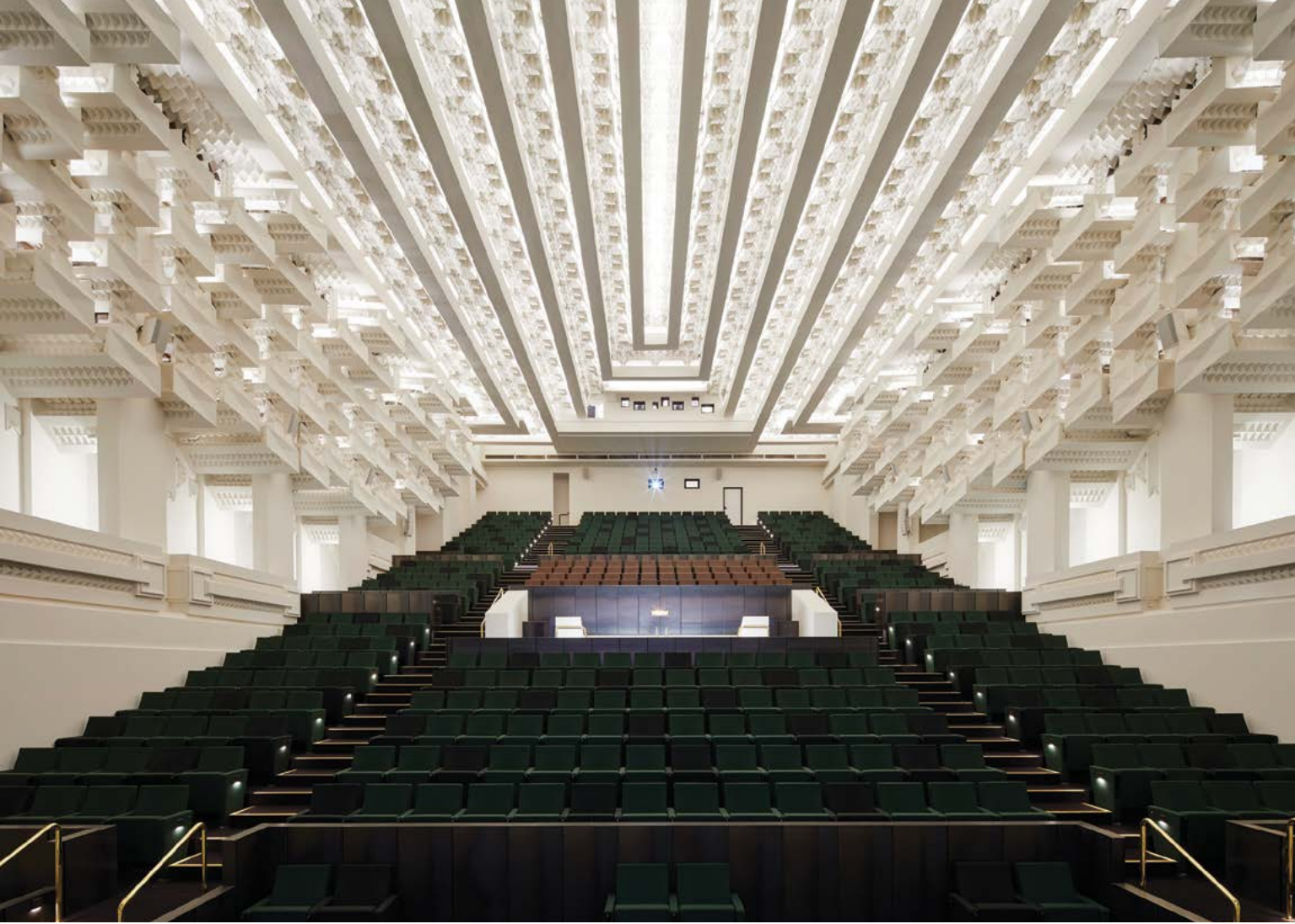
Level one floor plan (main foyer)
1:750



Ground floor plan
1:750



Section
1:1000





← Much more intimate than the theatre space itself, the reclaimed break-out areas are visually connected by a void and overlook the main foyer below.

↙ Along with backlit glazing with bronzed glazing bars, the break-out spaces and foyer feature chequered ornamental strips on the columns and balustrades.

↓ An understated stair with dark carpet leads to the glittering theatre above.

and the carpet is also dark. The idea seems to have been to make the new elements robust and recessive in order to let the delicate extravagance of the original ceiling shine forth. It works. The plasterwork has been repaired, and the colours of walls and ceiling – off-whites with bronze highlights – kept to the original. The screen that fills the proscenium can be rolled away to reveal a stage. The lights have been rewired and refitted with LED lamps and the audiovisual technology updated (with the only visible sign being a couple of racks of stage lights suspended beneath the ceiling near the front of the theatre). There were many fire-engineering issues but the theatre remains unsprinklered – a heritage plus.

Six Degrees' work was not confined to the theatre and its ancillary spaces. The designers have also made changes at ground level to the building's main entrance space, the street canopy and the shopping arcade. Here, the main interior work was to restore what was left of the Griffins' design and to change the finishes, stripping out the undistinguished plasterboard of the 1960s to reveal the concrete structure above. Steel claddings reflect the balustrades in the lobby and the theatre, and large photographs of the original building entry show its layout and finishes. The result is perhaps somewhat incongruous – a collage of elements and sensibilities. But given that the original 1924 decor was long gone, along with the era that made it, this is apt; the new work doesn't offer a false unity. The appearance of the arcade is much improved from its previous 1960s drear, with strip lighting, consistent illuminated signage and small mirrored bulkheads along the edges of the revealed concrete ceiling offering modest sparkle.

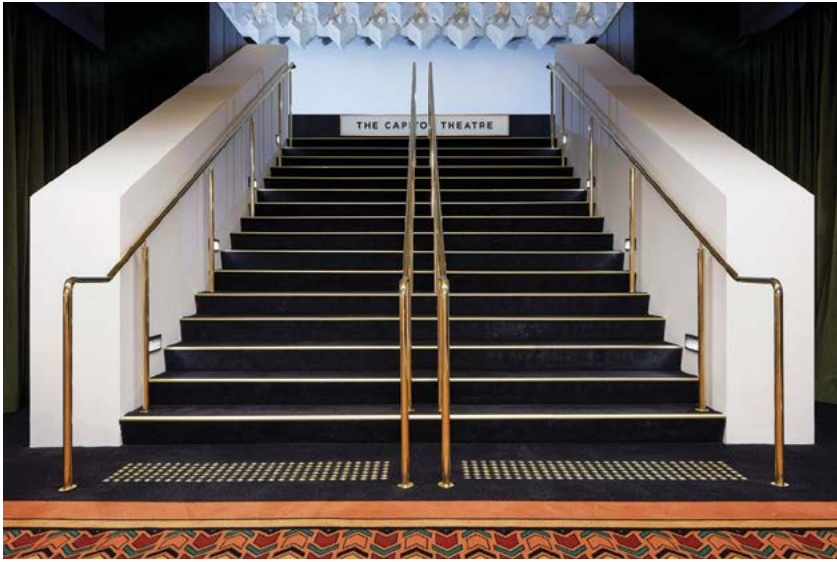
Six Degrees' reworking of the Capitol is restrained and graceful. The commission was not to return the building to its original state – two-thousand-seat cinemas are not a contemporary reality, and 550 seats is more than adequate for the space's current principal function as a lecture theatre. We must be grateful that the architectural glory of the theatre – its fabulous ceiling – survived the 1960s downscaling intact and that Six Degrees has managed to re-engineer it to beguile audiences for another hundred years. RMIT University has been a good Melbourne citizen in undertaking to return the Capitol to its significant place in the city's cultural life. What will happen to the Capitol when universities no longer hold lectures is a dilemma for the (near) future. In the meantime, we can again enjoy the shock of encountering the dazzling decor of the Griffins' remarkable room.

— Paul Walker is a professor of architecture at the University of Melbourne.

Footnotes

1. Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin proposed a ziggurat-form Capitol Building for Capitol Hill in their design for Canberra. See Jeff Turnbull and Peter Y. Navaretti (eds), *The Griffins in Australia and India: The complete works and projects of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 50.

2. Turnbull and Navaretti, 197.



Architect Six Degrees Architects; Project team Peter Malatt, Simon O'Brien, Timothy Rodgers, Lucasta Clothier-Fairs, Nick Withey, Anastasia Sklavakis, John Hajko, Daniel Perrone, Robyn Ho, Deeana Mingerulli, Emma Serraglio; Project manager, services and structural engineer GHD; Quantity surveyor Slattery; Building surveyor BSGM; Fire engineer Affinity; Access consultant Morris Goding; Heritage consultant Michael Taylor Architects; Planning Urbis