

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

# BONDI PAVILION



Images from top:

Bondi Bay, 1890. Photo by Harry King, image courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum.

Picnickers at Bondi Beach; Sydney & Ashfield : Broadhurst Post Card Publishers. Image courtesy of the SLNSW.

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## A Waverley Library Local History Fact Sheet

Bondi Pavilion holds a special place in the Bondi landscape and has a long history within the local community. A landmark social venue and valued community facility, the Pavilion is also important for its architectural design. From dressing sheds to ballroom and concert hall, to theatre and community centre, the Pavilion is an enduring symbol of the Australian beach experience.

Through the mid to late 1800s rock pools were the preferred ocean bathing spot at Bondi, despite bans on daylight swimming. In 1881 the Colonial Government surveyed an area of Bondi Beach for “public recreation”, and more than 25 hectares were dedicated as a public reserve in 1882. In 1884 Sydney’s developing tram network reached Tamarama and brought Bondi Beach within

walking distance of public transport for the first time.

The popularity of the ‘clean and healthful pastime of surf bathing’ boomed in the early 1900s, even though the act was still technically banned during daylight hours. The 1889 By-Law No. 145 of the Borough of Waverley declared:

*“Any person who, except in a public bath and proper bathing dress, shall bathe near to or within view of any inhabited house, reserve, or place of public resort, between the hours of 8 o’clock in the morning and 8 o’clock in the evening, shall be liable to a penalty not exceeding five pounds nor less than five shillings.”*

Despite the threat of fines, there was enough demand for

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Images from top:

Early dressing sheds at Bondi Beach, 1900-1910. Image courtesy of the SLNSW.

Bondi Castle Pavilion, 1917.

access that a regular tram service running direct from Circular Quay to Bondi was opened in October 1902, which increased again the use and popularity of the beach.

Swimmers commonly changed into their heavy woollen bathing costumes, cut from neck to knees, on the beach itself. This habit attracted many complaints to Waverley Council and letters to the editors at local newspapers calling for 'innocent women' picnicking in Bondi Park to be protected from the unseemly sight of men changing on the beach. Waverley Council erected the first surf bathing shed shelters around 1903. The sheds quickly proved inadequate, and public opinion and the increase in beach patronage provided the impetus for building a new surf pavilion.

## THE CASTLE

In December 1909 Waverley Council asked for tenders for a new surf pavilion, eventually accepting the design submitted by Taylor and Bills for £3,000.

Affectionately known as 'The Castle,' or the 'Castle Pavilion' because of its whimsical fairy tale turrets, its official name was the Bondi or Municipal Surf Sheds. Despite its pretty appearance, the building was simply a dressing shed; a private place to get in and out of your swimming costume. It opened for public use on 3 October, 1911 but was officially opened by the Premier of NSW at 3pm on 18 November, 1911. The Premier stated that "Bondi claims to have the finest bathing accommodation of any ocean beaches." It was equipped with 1,000 'dressing boxes', 750 for men and 250 for women, each one contained a seat and several books for swimmers to read while on the beach.

There were side passages leading from the changing boxes to the beach, and on returning to shore the swimmers would wade through a channel of water running along the passages to remove any sand from their feet. The Castle Pavilion was short lived,

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Images from top:

The newly constructed Bondi Pavilion, 1928.

Council workers building the Pavilion, 1928.

with the order for its demolition carried out on 6 June, 1928.

## THE NEW PAVILION

The rationale for the replacement of the Castle Pavilion lay in the rising popularity of beach swimming and surfing. With more people than ever using the beach, services needed to improve accordingly. The Bondi Improvement Scheme was launched in 1923, and the design competition for a new Pavilion was fierce, with tenders coming in from around the world.

The architectural firm Robertson & Marks won the competition, though the Pavilion design changed frequently over the following years. The design of the Bondi Pavilion itself is generally credited to Leith McCredie, an architect who had worked for Robertson & Marks for several years before becoming a partner in July 1928.

Building began on the new Pavilion in May 1928, before the Castle Pavilion was

demolished. The new design included changing areas, Turkish baths, shops, lockers, a gym and a ballroom. Built in a mixture of Georgian revival and Mediterranean styles, the colonnade façade was as exotic then as it is iconic now.

The Esplanade was a restaurant-cabaret in the new Pavilion. It was very classy, boasting *'Private Dining Rooms. Palm Court and Alcoves. Cabaret and Private Ballroom.'* There were popular dance nights every Monday and Thursday, with the De Luxe Supper Dance held every Saturday night. Afternoon tea and a soda fountain were available to be enjoyed on *'Spacious Verandahs commanding an unrivalled panorama of the Ocean and Beach.'*

The Turkish and Hot Sea Water Baths opened in the Pavilion on 20 July 20, 1929. They had a massage room, a lounge, an electric fan for drying hair and free 'medical' weighing machines. The baths weren't particularly successful, and by



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Images from top:

Bondi 'Playground of the Pacific' poster, ca. 1930s. NSW Government Tourist Bureau, image courtesy of NSW State Archives and Records.

Audience at an evening concert at Bondi Pavilion Band Shell, 1940s.

1932 they had been shut down and the space leased in mid-1933 to the North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club.

In October 1933 the space was converted into an amusement parlour, though by 1934 it had reverted back to its bath house origins. There had been substantial structural deterioration, and the original equipment had become outdated. Limited operations continued throughout the 1940s until after the war, when the Bondi [Beach] Boy's Club took over the space.

## WORLD WAR II

During the Second World War Bondi was identified as a potential invasion point by enemy forces. On the recommendation of military authorities, Waverley Council destroyed the concrete entrances to the underground passages leading from the beach to the Pavilion dressing sheds in 1942. The amount of explosives needed was overestimated, and the resulting blast damaged the Pavilion, the Surf Life Saving

Club and several buildings on Campbell Parade. Almost all the windows of the Pavilion were broken and the roof badly damaged. The beach front was fenced off with barbed wire "rat runs" as part of the wartime defences.

Despite these emergency measures, the first floor of the pavilion continued in pre-war mode with Roy Starfield's cabarets, trading under the name of the "Cheer Up Club". In January 1944 the first floor of the Pavilion was taken over by the American Red Cross and operated as a Service Men's Club until the end of the war.

In the late 1940s a 'Surf & Dance at Bondi (The playground of the Pacific)' began on a Sundays from 2.30-6.30 p.m. Proceeds of the dances would go to charitable organisations including the:

- Diggers' Cigarette Fund, which supplied cigarettes and tobacco to the former Australian soldiers now in Yaralla Hospital
- Lady Davidson Home
- War Veterans' Home

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Images from top:

Reg Stewart at the Esplanade, Bondi ca. 1945. Image courtesy of the NLA.

Figures on Bondi Beach, Bondi Pavilion 1930s-1960s. Photo by Max Dupain, image courtesy of SLNSW.

- Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Soldiers' Association.

The dancers could come in beach wear or sports clothes, but bikinis were prohibited.

After the war, Council received a settlement of £7,000 for claims of damages incurred during the Army's occupation.

In 1948 the Pavilion obtained a liquor licence, and the concerts, dances and cabarets that had continued through the war spun merrily on.

### A HUB FOR ARTS AND CULTURE

By the mid-1950s, the popularity of the Pavilion as an entertainment venue had faded. Advances in synthetic swimwear materials and design meant that changing sheds were becoming a thing of the past. People simply wore their swimming costume to the beach and home again as the costume would be able to dry during the day. By 1959 the building was deteriorating and unlicensed. By the 1960s a

third of the men's changing rooms had been closed, functions were rarely held, and the Bondi tramline had shut down.

In 1963 the popular dance the 'Stomp' was banned in the Esplanade Hall because the Council engineer feared subsidence in the building's foundations. By the 1970s the Pavilion had become nothing more than an embarrassment and the phrase "great white elephant" came into currency in the media. In a rather memorable quote in the Sun-Herald in July 1975, Councillor David Taylor says "I'd like to put a bomb under the Bondi Pavilion and a new start made on a casino."

This public attitude prompted a reinvention of the Pavilion and the role it played in the community. In 1973 the Bondi Theatre Group made a proposal to Waverley Council to convert the old Palm Court Ballroom into a theatre. With the help of a \$50,000 grant work was completed in March 1974 and heralded the start of

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Images from top:

Opening night of the Bondi Pavilion Theatre. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam shakes hands with Maurice Symonds (director of 'The Fantastiks'), with Waverley Mayor Ernie Page behind. 23 March, 1947.

A panel of the 'Bondi the Beautiful' mural by Rodney Monk and others at Bondi Pavilion, 1980.

the transformation from a building described as a 'damp mildewed, mock-Spanish mansion... sadly unchanged since the era of neck-to-knees bathing costumes' to a cultural and community centre.

The new theatre was opened in 1974 by then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. With a new influx of creativity, the Pavilion was reborn becoming a centre of cultural programs in the Bondi area. The old Turkish baths, change rooms, and lockers were removed and construction began on a new gymnasium, exhibition rooms, and an 500-seat outdoor amphitheatre, netball court, child care centre, workshops for craft classes, a restaurant, and a nominal amount of changing sheds.

The Pavilion was classified in 1977 by the National Trust in recognition of its historical significance. On 28 June 1978 the revitalised Bondi Community Arts Centre was officially opened by the Premier Mr Neville Wran. In September 1978 the first Festival of Winds

event took place, and by its 50th birthday the Bondi Pavilion had re-established its place as an integral part of the local community.

In 1980 Waverley Council commissioned Public Art Squad team members Rodney Monk, David Humphries, Wayne Hutchings and Kristine Ammitzball to create an iconic mural in the courtyard of the Pavilion. The team worked with local community members to create a series of images celebrating Bondi's history, beach life and culture. The 'Bondi the Beautiful' mural was 625m<sup>2</sup>, with team members and community participants painting bold, 1920s inspired imaged of rugged lifesavers, bathing beauties, local characters and Australian wildlife. The mural became a part of the Pavilion's public identity and was one of Australia's most photographed murals. The installation remained up for many years before wear and tear made it necessary to remove it.

In 1983 Indigenous artist Dhurritjiui Terry Yumbulul

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Images from top:

Floor mosaics at Bondi Pavilion by Aboriginal artist Dhurritjiui Terry Yumbulul.

Crowd in the courtyard of Bondi Pavilion at the 1982 South American Carnival Festival.

designed floor mosaics for the building while exhibiting at the Bondi Pavilion Gallery. The mosaics were laid in 1984, and are among the first Indigenous paintings translated to a ceramic medium. The larger mosaic design is based on the dreaming of the creation of land and sea, while the smaller piece expresses the need for harmony and caring between all living things.

## CAMELOT BY THE SEA

In the late 1980s a push to privatise the Pavilion was met with widespread condemnation from local community groups, artists, musicians, conservationists and politicians. A proposal in June 1987 by the Hayson Group was submitted and met favourably by then Waverley Council Mayor Carol Markham. The press statement released by the Hayson Group on its plans for the Pavilion described the proposal as

*'an opportunity to combine commercial activities with cultural and community activities in order to create a unique place for people.*

*A place which will attract the local community, Sydneysiders and tourists.'*

The proposed redevelopment dubbed 'Camelot by the Sea' planned to introduce boutiques, restaurants, coffee shops, markets and a tourist information centre. The plan met outrage in the public forum. By August 1987, six thousand people had signed a petition protesting against the proposal.

Due to the public and political furore, the Minister for Lands, Mr Hallam, initiated a Bondi Pavilion Task Force which submitted a report to the Government in October 1988. In September following Council elections a change in the Mayor and Council leadership meant that the plan fell out of favour. For several years, political and legal wrangling continued until eventually the bid for privatisation of the Pavilion quietly died.

## HERITAGE LISTING

The Pavilion is heritage listed on a local, state, and national level. Bondi Pavilion is included



Images from top:

Chess players in the alcoves,  
south wall Bondi Pavilion 1973.

View through the arches at  
Bondi Pavilion, 1990s.

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in the Australian Heritage Council's National Heritage listing for Bondi Beach, included in the NSW Heritage Council's State Heritage Register listing for the Bondi Beach Cultural Landscape, and it is also listed as a heritage item by Waverley Council.

Bondi Beach and surrounds, including the Pavilion, were listed on the Register of the National Estate in 1993. Administered by the Australian Heritage Commission, the listing meant that any development or redevelopment of the Pavilion had to consider the historical and social significance of the area.

In 1996 an upgrade plan was approved for the Pavilion. Costing \$2.3M and lasting four years, the upgrades involved building an all-purpose hall, recording studio and rehearsal rooms. Bondi Park was also slated for improvements, with replanting, paving and landscaping all being completed. Construction finished in 2000 just in time for the Olympics, with the beach

volleyball event held at Bondi Beach.

The construction of a glass restaurant enclosure on the northern side of the building in 2004 was controversial and resulted in the Council seeking additional heritage listing for the building. Applications were made to the NSW Heritage Register in 2004. This nomination resulted in a higher level of responsibility in the planning, design and maintenance of alterations to the structure.

A Marine Discovery Centre was installed in part of the former Turkish Baths, adjacent to the community offices around 2005. It subsequently closed in October 2013.

## **SAVING BONDI PAVILION**

In November 2014 Waverley Council adopted the Bondi Park, Beach and Pavilion Plan of Management.

In 2015 Tonkin Zulaikha Greer (TZG) Architects were commissioned to upgrade the Pavilion with improved facilities



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Images from top:

Save Bondi Pavilion 'makeover not takeover' 08 Sep 2017.  
Andrew Worssam Photography,  
image courtesy of The  
Guardian.

Render of one of the proposed  
concept designs for Bondi  
Pavilion by TZG Architects.

and amenities for visitors to the building, park and beach. The \$38M concept design put forward for public consultation in December 2015 drew considerable comment from the community, with more than 700 submissions being made. Concerns centred around several elements of the concept design including repurposing of the first floor of the Pavilion, replacement of the current theatre with a new multi-purpose space in the southern courtyard, and loss of the current music and recording studios, pottery studio and community hireable space.

The community action group Save Bondi Pavilion formed in protest against the proposed redevelopment amid fears parts of the pavilion would be privatised. Associated with the group were celebrities including Michael Caton, Jack Thompson, Peter Garrett, and Hoodoo Gurus frontman Dave Faulkner. Several Save Bondi Pavilion concerts were held throughout 2016 and sought to raise awareness of the campaign. A 'green ban' was

announced by the Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union (CFMEU) at one of these events.

A review process of the project conducted by consultants KJA was undertaken in August-September 2016. In November 2016, Council resolved to proceed with the works in stages, and a proposed Stage 1 integrated development application for the Bondi Pavilion upgrade & Conservation Project was submitted in March 2017.

Following council elections, in October 2017 Council voted to establish the Bondi Pavilion Stakeholder Committee. The committee was formed in November and included community members, stakeholder and precinct representatives and Bondi Ward Councillors. The committee recommended that the 2017 Development Application be withdrawn, and a new design brief created. In February 2018 Council voted to formally withdraw the Stage 1 Upgrade Plans.



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Images from top:

Render of the main pavilion,  
TZG Architects.

Rediscovered murals in the  
Bondi Theatre dating back pre-  
World War II. The murals were  
restored in the 2020-2022  
Bondi Pavilion Restoration and  
Upgrade project. Photo by  
Vaida Savickaite, image  
courtesy of The Broadsheet.

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In June 2018 Waverley Council adopted the Bondi Pavilion Conservation Management Plan which “recognises the Pavilion as the centrepiece of Bondi Park, community life and grand point of entry to Bondi Beach from Campbell Parade.” Council also voted to approve the revised architect’s brief.

By September 2018 TZG Architects had developed new concept designs, which were opened for community consultation. Following community feedback, design changes were made and endorsed by council. Detailed design plans began, and in April 2019 the Development Application for the Bondi Pavilion Restoration and Conservation project was formally lodged. The DA was approved in December 2019 by the Sydney Eastern City Planning Panel.

Buildcorp were announced as the head contractor to carry out works on 19 June, 2020. Slated to be an 18-month, \$27M restoration and construction project, work began in August

2020. Weather and COVID-19 restrictions delayed construction and pushed the reopening to September 2022.

The \$48M upgrade features an improved gallery, theatre and pottery facilities, music studios, a community radio studio and a beach heritage space named the Bondi Story Room. Heritage features were conserved, significant structural and safety improvements were made, roof tiles replaced and 200 solar panels installed to cater for about 70% of the site’s energy use.

During the restoration works murals were rediscovered in the theatre, which are believed to date back to its use as the Esplanade Ball Room pre World War II. While the Bondi Pavilion Theatre operated from 1974-2019, one of the murals was partly visible behind Perspex from the rear raked seating. During the 2020-2022 Restoration and Upgrade, two more murals featuring a tap dancer and hula girl were uncovered. The three murals were restored and feature as



Images from top:

Internal courtyard of Bondi Pavilion with restored portion of 'Bondi the Beautiful' mural, 2022. Photo by Vaida Savickaite, image courtesy of The Broadsheet.

Aerial photo from the south of the newly refurbished Bondi Pavilion, 2022.

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heritage artwork.

The beautifully restored Pavilion was re-opened to the public with an all-ages community, arts and culture celebration at 6pm, Wednesday 21 September 2022. Events included:

- A concert in the main courtyard and other musical performances
- A preview of the Waverley Art Prize finalists in the Bondi Pavilion Gallery
- Local culture and stories to explore in the Bondi Story Room
- Live storytelling with Bondi Story Room identities in the Yalagang Room
- Indigenous shelling demonstration in the High Tide Room
- Screenings of historical reels of footage of Bondi from the National Film and Sound Archives

- Flickerfest short films showcase in the Theatre
- A pop-up exhibition featuring the journey of Bondi Pavilion's transformation in the Ocean Room
- Food and drinks courtyard, beach-side and in the bar
- Kid's entertainment including games and gelato

The Pavilion continues to hold a special place in the local landscape and is one of the most recognised features on Bondi Beach. Regular festivals and special events continue through the year, attracting crowds of people and reminding us of when people would come and dance away a Saturday night in the glory days of the Bondi Pavilion.