

Bondi Pavilion: a short history



The Bondi 'Castle' Pavilion, 1917.

The Bondi Pavilion has a long history of both reinvention and neglect. Viewed for decades as a rather unsightly white elephant, the Pavilion has been the focus of a variety of rejuvenation schemes. From ballroom and concert hall to theatre and community centre, the Pavilion has always figured large in the local landscape.

The boom in popularity of the new 'clean and healthful pastime of surf bathing' in the early 1900s gave impetus to the building of dressing sheds on Bondi Beach. In 1909 Waverley Council asked for tenders for the structure, eventually accepting the design submitted by Taylor and Bills for £3,000. This first Bondi Pavilion was affectionately known to the locals as 'The Castle,' or the 'Castle Pavilion' because of its whimsical fairytale-like turrets.

Its official name was the Bondi Surf Sheds, sometimes described by the rather plain moniker the Municipal Surf Sheds. Despite its pretty appearance the building was, in reality, simply a dressing shed, a private place to get in and out of your swimming costume which was built by Council to stop the increasingly common practise of swimmers (mainly male swimmers) changing on the beach in full view of the public. It opened for use on 3 October 1911, although the official opening was on 18 November 1911 at 3.00pm. It was quipped 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 return, the swimmers would wade through a channel of water running along the passages to remove any sand from their feet. The Castle Pavilion had a short life span, however, with the order for its demolition carried out on 6 June 1928.

The rationale for the replacement of the Castle Pavilion lay in the ever rising popularity of beach swimming and surfing. With more people than ever using the beach, the services provided 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 and Marks won the competition, though the Pavilion design changed frequently over the following years. Building began on the new Pavilion in May 1928, with the design including changing areas, Turkish baths, shops, lockers, a gym and a ballroom. Built in a mixture of Georgian revival and Mediterranean styles, the colonnade façades were as exotic then as they are iconic now.



Council workers building the Bondi Pavilion, 1928.

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, where the note that 'Dress optional' probably was not as literal as it now sounds. Afternoon tea and a soda fountain were available at all times 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. Unfortunately, they weren't particularly successful, by 1932, the Turkish baths

had been shut down, and the space leased to the North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club by mid 1933.

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, however, 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.

During the Second World War Bondi was identified as a potential invasion point and in 1942 the Council, on the recommendation of military authorities, destroyed the concrete entrances to the underground passages leading from the beach to the dressing sheds at the back of the Pavilion. 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.

In January 1944, the first floor of the Pavilion in the rooms which had been the former Esplanade Cabaret were requisitioned by the American Red Cross and U.S. military officers who ran it as an officers' club til 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 such as the Diggers' Cigarette Fund, which supplied cigarettes and tobacco to the former Australian soldiers now in Yaralla Hospital, Lady Davidson Home and War Veterans' Home and to the Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Soldiers' Association. The dancers could come in beach wear or sports clothes, but bikinis were prohibited. In 1948 the Pavilion obtained a liquor licence, and the concerts, dances and cabarets that had continued through the war spun merrily on.

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 and functions were rarely held. By the 1970s the Pavilion had become nothing more than an embarrassment. In a rather memorable quote in the *Sun-Herald* in July 1975, Councillor David Taylor says "I'd like to put a bomb put 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 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.



Gough and Margaret Whitlam watch a young David Gulpilil at the opening of the Bondi Pavilion Theatre, 1974.

The new theatre was opened in 1974 by then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. With a new influx of creativity, the Pavilion was re-born 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 outdoor amphitheatre for 500, netball court, child care centre, workshops for craft classes, a restaurant, and a nominal amount of changing sheds. The Pavilion was also 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. Now on its 50th birthday the Bondi Pavilion had re-established its place as an integral part of the local community.

In 1980 the artist Mr Rodney Monks was commissioned to paint a mural on the walls of the Pavilion which went on to become famous in the public art arena. Aided by locals, Monks created a series of images that celebrated beach life and culture in the area. The mural became an integral part of the Pavilion's public identity, and lasted for many years before wear and tear made it necessary for it to be removed.



Part of Bondi Pavilion's mural on the internal courtyard walls, 1980.

The vision of the Pavilion as a community based and locally held centre was threatened in the late 1980s. A movement by Waverley Council to privatise a building described bizarrely

by one media commentator as the 'Ayers Rock of Urban Australia' 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 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 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.

After the turmoil of these years in 1993 the listing of Bondi Beach and surrounds, including the Pavilion on the Register of the National Estate was a positive relief. Administered by the Australian Heritage Commission, the listing meant that any development or redevelopment of the Pavilion had to take into account the historical and social significance of the area

In 1996 an upgrade plan was approved for the Pavilion. Costing \$2.3 million dollars, and lasting four years the upgrades involved the construction of 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.

The Pavilion's management requires balancing its heritage value and its commercial ventures. 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.

The Pavilion continues to hold a special place in the local landscape and is one of the most recognised features on Bondi Beach . The continuing expansion of the arts and cultural programs include an artist-in-residence, refurbishment of the theatre, landscaping of the courtyards and upgrading of the amphitheatre. Regular festivals and special events continue through the year, bringing people in their hundreds and reminding us of when people would come and dance away a Saturday night in the glory days of the Bondi Pavilion.