

Redevelopment maintains as much history as possible

Gem's memory preserved



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THEY were taking the roof off one of Rockhampton's architectural gems yesterday.

But the owner of the Wintergarden Theatre vowed his multi-million-dollar redevelopment would preserve its memory.

Sid Kneel said it wouldn't be clear until the first stage of demolition was complete how much of the theatre could be saved and incorporated into his grand design for the site.

"When it is finished, this will be the most prominent building in Rockhampton," said Mr Kneel, whose Blue Chip Development Corporation has submitted a development application for the building to Rockhampton City Council.

"What we intend to do as developers is all we can to preserve the memory of the Wintergarden.

"It is our intention to retain the

facade and the area behind it and use it for a ground floor bar and restaurant."

There was no heritage listing currently in place that would protect the theatre from redevelopment, he said, but it was the company's intention to keep as many original features as possible.

"We understand the historic significance of the building to Rockhampton and we have been delighted by the support we have had from the local community and the City Council," he said.

"There is a lot of backing for a sympathetic redevelopment."

With the council still to approve the plans, Mr Kneel was reluctant to go into precise detail about the potential costs or size and scale of the new construction behind the facade.

But it is understood that the project could cost in excess of \$30 million.

Mr Kneel said the finished complex would comprise retail shops, commercial offices, an apartment hotel and residential apartments.



GRAND DESIGNS: The facade may stay but the rest of the Wintergarden Theatre is being flattened. CI19/1207/14

In its heyday the Wintergarden Theatre was the hub of the city's entertainment industry. During

World War II it showed movies in the afternoons and staged dances and shows in the evenings.

And as recently as the late 1990s it was showing silent films.

Wintergarden a wonderland

DEMOLITION man Ray Busby says tearing down Rockhampton's landmark Wintergarden Theatre has brought fond memories flooding back.

"As teenagers we took our girlfriends there, and my mother sang on the stage," he said yesterday, as his workers removed sections of the historic theatre's roof.

"When I was young this building was the centre of everything and it's sad to be pulling it down.

"It's got such sentimental value, not just to me but to generations of people who grew up in Rockhampton."

Mr Busby, who runs Busby Demolition, said his team of 12 workers would be on site until February, flattening everything behind the brick Alma Street facade of one of Birch Carroll and Coyle's original

1920s theatres.

"We are trying to keep everything of historic value. We've taken away some beautiful flooring and lovely doors that can be salvaged and given a new life.

"No expense was spared when the theatre was built."

But he said the concrete walls were crumbling and were beyond renovation.

"It's dangerous now and wasn't secure, but I'm proud to be part of a process that will result in something very special.

"The owner has very big plans for the site.

City historian Dr Lorna McDonald said the theatre had been designed for the tropical climate and described it as remarkable, beautiful and historic with incredible chandeliers.



HAPPY MEMORIES: Ray Busby supervises demolition work at the Wintergarden Theatre yesterday afternoon. Picture by CHRIS ISON.

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