

# Heritage (Further Registration Decision for the Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign, Watson) Notice 2016

## Notifiable Instrument NI2016–173

made under the

### Heritage Act 2004, section 24A and 40 Notice of decision about a Further Registration Decision

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#### 1 Name of instrument

This instrument is the *Heritage (Further Registration Decision for the Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign, Watson) Notice 2016*.

#### 2 Registration details of the place

Pursuant to Section 24A of the *Heritage Act 2004* (the Act), the ACT Heritage Council (the Council) has made a further registration decision to change a registration detail mentioned in section 12 (c) of the Act ('a description of the place, including its extent or boundary').

In accordance with Section 40 of the Act the Council is required to notify its further registration decision.

Details of the further registration decision are at [Schedule A](#).

#### 3 Reason for decision

The Council has previously registered the Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign, Watson to the ACT Heritage Register as it met one or more of the heritage significance criteria at s 10 of the Act.

In October 2015 the sign was reinstalled in a new position, immediately adjacent to its original location, on road reserve.

Due to the relocation of the sign, registration details affecting the location of the sign require amendment. Other matters have not changed. The Council is satisfied that the original reasoning continues to apply such that the Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign, Watson continues to warrant registration under the Act and in particular continues to

have heritage significance as defined by section 10 of the Act notwithstanding the adjustment in location.

Further details of the reason for the decision are at Schedule A.


**4 Date of registration**

7 April 2016

**5 Revocation**

The [Heritage (further Provisional Registration Decision for the Starlight Drive-In theatre Sign, Watson) notifiable instrument NI 2015-663 and notifiable instrument 2012-95 [Heritage (Decision about Registration for the Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign, Watson)] are revoked.

Fiona Moore  
A/g Secretary (as delegate for)  
ACT Heritage Council  
7 April 2016

 <p>ACT Heritage Council</p>	<p><b>AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY</b></p> <p><b>HERITAGE REGISTER</b> <b>(Registration Details)</b></p>
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For the purposes of s.24A and 40 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, the ACT Heritage Council has made a further registration decision for the following place:

**Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign, Federal Highway, Watson, ACT**

**Road verge adjacent to Block 14, Section 61, Watson, Canberra Central**

**DATE OF FURTHER REGISTRATION**

7 April 2016

Notifiable Instrument: 2016-173

Copies of the Register Entry are available for inspection at ACT Heritage. For further information please contact:

The Secretary  
ACT Heritage Council  
GPO Box 158, Canberra, ACT 2601

Telephone: 13 22 81

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This section refers to the location of the place as required in s.12(b) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### **LOCATION OF THE PLACE**

Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign, Federal Highway, Watson, ACT

Road verge adjacent to Block 14, Section 61, Watson, Canberra Central

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This section refers to the location of the place as required in s.12(c) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE**

The attributes place is comprised of:

- Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign including:
    - Double-sided 'Starlight entrance' signage panel including text font and size
    - Shape and form of steel frame
    - Two single-sided advertising spaces.
  - Visibility of the sign from the highway; and
  - Capacity for the sign to be illuminated.
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This statement refers to the heritage significance of the place as required in s.12(d) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### **STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE**

This statement refers to the Heritage Significance of the place as required in s12(d) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

The Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign remains as the only tangible reminder in the ACT of the iconic era of drive-ins (outdoor theatres where patrons viewed films from parked cars) which dotted the Australian landscape from the mid twentieth century. Drive-in theatres were immensely popular as a form of entertainment of which the sign remains as an iconic symbol. They had their peak popularity from the 1950s until the 1970s, and have formed a strong component in the psyche and consciousness of the community who attended them. They are also an iconic symbol of this era for all.

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign at Watson is thought to be the only original drive-in theatre sign in Australia which still stands in its original location.

The sign is important as evidence of a distinctive custom of the drive-in theatre era which is no longer practised in the ACT. As the only reminder of the drive-in era in the ACT, it also has a strong association with this cultural phase.

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### **CONSERVATION OBJECTIVE**

The guiding conservation objective is that the Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign shall be conserved and appropriately managed in a manner respecting its heritage significance.

The ACT Heritage Council may adopt heritage guidelines applicable to the place under s25 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

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For further information on guidelines applicable to the place, or for advice on proposed works or development, please contact ACT Heritage on 13 22 81.

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### REASON FOR REGISTRATION

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign, Watson has been assessed against the heritage significance criteria and been found to have heritage significance when assessed against two criteria under the ACT *Heritage Act 2004*:

- (c) it is important as evidence of a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function that is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost or is of exceptional interest; and
  - (h) it has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase in local or national history.
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### ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

Under section 10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, a place or object has heritage significance if it satisfies one or more of the criteria set out in section 10. The criteria and reasons associated with the original decision to register the place was determined by research as accessed in the references below. Future research may alter the findings of this assessment. The Council is satisfied that the original reasoning and conclusions continue to apply and meet the criteria for significance under section 10.

- (a) it demonstrates a high degree of technical or creative achievement (or both), by showing qualities of innovation, discovery, invention or an exceptionally fine level of application of existing techniques or approaches;**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

- (b) it exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group;**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

- (c) it is important as evidence of a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function that is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost or is of exceptional interest;**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign is important as evidence of a distinctive function that is no longer practised in the ACT. It serves as a tangible reminder of the drive-in era from the mid-twentieth century and is the only such reminder in the ACT. Drive-in theatres were immensely popular as a form of entertainment of which the sign remains as an iconic symbol.

Further, the sign is important as evidence of this function as the only original drive-in theatre sign in Australia which is still standing in its original location.

The Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign meets this criterion.

- (d) it is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations;**

While it is acknowledged that many people have fond memories of the Starlight Theatre, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the Starlight Theatre Sign is highly valued by the community or a cultural group, sufficient to meet the threshold level for this criterion.

The Starlight Drive-In theatre Sign does not meet this criterion based on current evidence.

**(e) it is significant to the ACT because of its importance as part of local Aboriginal tradition**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

**(f) it is a rare or unique example of its kind, or is rare or unique in its comparative intactness**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

**(g) it is a notable example of a kind of place or object and demonstrates the main characteristics of that kind**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

**(h) it has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase in local or national history**

The Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign has a strong association with the cultural phase of the era of drive-in theatres in the mid twentieth century. This was a distinctive era, of which the sign remains as an iconic reminder. The sign has a special association with this cultural phase as the only physical remnant of the drive-in phenomenon in the ACT.

The Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign meets this criterion.

**(i) it is significant for understanding the evolution of natural landscapes, including significant geological features, landforms, biota or natural processes**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

**(j) it has provided, or is likely to provide, information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the natural or cultural history of the ACT because of its use or potential use as a research site or object, teaching site or object, type locality or benchmark site**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

**(k) for a place—it exhibits unusual richness, diversity or significant transitions of flora, fauna or natural landscapes and their elements**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

**(l) for a place—it is a significant ecological community, habitat or locality for any of the following:**

- (i) the life cycle of native species;**
- (ii) rare, threatened or uncommon species;**
- (iii) species at the limits of their natural range;**
- (iv) distinct occurrences of species.**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign does not meet this criterion.

## SUMMARY OF THE PLACE HISTORY AND PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

### HISTORY

The world's first drive-in theatre opened in 1933 in New Jersey, America. In America 'the drive-in's peak popularity came in the late 1950s and early 1960s, particularly in rural areas, with some 4,000 drive-ins spreading across the United States. Among its advantages was the fact that a family with a baby could take care of their child while watching a movie, while teenagers with access to cars found drive-ins ideal for dates' (Wikipedia).

Drive-In Theatres provided an outdoor screen which customers could watch from the privacy and comfort of their own cars. Sound was provided initially through speakers on the screen, and later individual speakers for each car. The system was later superseded by broadcasting through a car's radio system.

Drive-In theatres experienced a surge in popularity during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly among young families and teenagers of driving age. The main drive-in theatre markets were in America, Canada and Australia, peaking from the 1950s till the 1970s.

Australia's first drive-in theatre opened in 1954 in Melbourne.

The Starlight Drive-in Theatre was opened in Canberra in 1957 by George Kimlin, as the ACT's first drive-in theatre. It was also one of the first drive-ins in Australia (*The Canberra Times*, 29 November 1982: 10). Its construction was completed in December 1956 and on Wednesday 2 January 1957 the theatre was opened by Sir Allen Fairhall, KBE, Minister for Interior and Works.

Ahead of its opening, on 2 January 1957, the *Canberra Times* reported that:

*'the giant screen, 70 ft high and 100 ft wide is a combination of style and strength. Built of tubular steel it can withstand a 70 m.p.h gale... The builders are certain that the huge screen will give the viewers a clear and well defined picture. The electrical system of the theatre is a complex maze... Five miles of wiring went into the connecting of the intricate electrical system... A playground for the children is one of the happiest features of the theatre, to add new fun to their picture night... The management also had the palettes of their audience in mind. Ultra modern equipment has been installed in the kitchen and the experts should be able to cater for even fastidious tastes at the cafeteria. The ticket office is designed so that cars can approach from either side'.*

The screen was claimed to be one of the largest in Australia at the time. In-car speakers for every car ensured that those parked at the back could hear just as well as those at the front.

The Starlight Drive-in operated from 1956 till 1993. During these 37 years, the Drive-In saw over six million visitors. 'Even with two movie sessions per night, six nights per week, the Starlight Drive-in was so popular that cars were regularly being turned away by 'house full' signs' (Motion-Wise, 2011: 4). At its opening, the drive-in had capacity to hold 500 cars.

Drive-In cinemas across Australia, established during the 1950s and 1960s 'had their following and a distinctive culture' (*The Canberra Times*, Thursday April 9 1987, p.9). At one time, Australia had over 330 drive-ins.

In 1982 Starlight Drive-In owner, George Kimlin of Canberra Enterprises Pty Ltd, stated that 'while the video-film industry and cable television might threaten the theatre industry, patrons could still see two top-listing feature films for \$4.75' (*The Canberra Times*, 17 October 1982). With this in mind, Canberra Enterprises sought a \$200,000 expansion program, including a second screen at the Starlight site.

Kimlin said that 'although opposition technological challenges would continue to come to the film-making industry, (communities) would still want drive-ins. The convenience and comfort of viewing a top program

at a twin, or even a triple, drive-in at a cost less than that of many other forms of entertainment would continue to attract large audiences. However, the drive-ins of the future might well be quite different from present ones' (*The Canberra Times*, 29 November 1982:11).

Despite his optimistic prognosis, in 1987 the Starlight Drive-In was sold by Canberra Enterprises to IM and M Investments and was closed six years later in 1993. Residential apartments were built on the site, ready for occupation by 2003.

The 1987 sale came about due to the lack of economic viability of the Drive-In after the advent of video and a variety of other entertainment media. George Kimlin's son, Chris has stated 'the demise of the Drive-in stemmed from a national convention where film sellers would preference cinemas for first release, meaning the drive-ins only got movies on second release, sometimes months after the films had been shown in cinemas' (*City News*, Oct 7-13 2010).

Canberra's other Drive-In Theatre, the Sundown at Narrabundah, opened in 1969 and closed two years prior to the Starlight, in 1991 due to a lack of business.

Despite the large-scale construction work undertaken on the Starlight site during the building of the apartments, the original sign was left in its original location, and is now thought to be the only Drive-In sign in Australia which still stands in its original location.

The sign was built in Sydney in 1956 ahead of the opening of the theatre. It was the first neon sign in Canberra, used to mark the entry to the Drive-In from the Federal Highway.

In 2010 Canberra's *City News* published a story about the state of neglect of the sign. '*City News* was flooded with letters from Drive-In movie lovers providing fond memories of family outings visiting Starlight time and again. The best letters were published representing the significance of the Starlight Drive-In sign as the vestige of nearly four decades of cinematic entertainment in Canberra during a time when no other entertainment venues were available' (Motion-Wise, 2011: 4).

In 2010 four drive-ins remained open in New South Wales, three in Victoria, six in Queensland, five in Western Australia, two in south Australia, and none in either Tasmania or the Northern Territory (Kilderry, 2010).

The Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign underwent significant repair and conservation works in 2015. In particular, this included the following:

- repair of wording on the sign itself;
- treatment of rusted panels and frame;
- the reconstruction of a matching panel to one side of the sign;
- L.E.D neon lighting being reinstated; and
- the removal of two panels below the main sign, due to risk of vandalism and for reasons of safety.

The sign was relocated off-site to enable these works to occur, and was reinstalled in October 2015. The location of the reinstallation is approximately 10 metres northwest of its original position, to enable its siting on publicly owned road reserve.

## **DESCRIPTION**

The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign at Watson is supported by an angular steel frame, painted white. The sign consists of three panels, only one of which remains in good condition, the 'Starlight Entrance' sign, in bold red with white writing. The sign stands approximately three metres high, and is approximately 1.5 metres wide.

### **Physical condition and integrity**



The Starlight Drive-In Theatre Sign, Watson is, in 2015, in a good state of repair. It remains structurally sound, though the two lower advertisement sign panels have disappeared. Wording on the uppermost panel has been reinstated and is clear from both sides. Electrical connections to illuminate the sign have recently been reinstated.

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## SITE PLAN

The Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign is located adjacent to the Federal highway, on road reserve. It is situated within 50 metres of its original location which marked the entrance to the Drive-in.



Sign location indicated by red circle.

## IMAGES



Image credit: Environment and Planning Directorate  
September 2015

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## REFERENCES

Kilderry, D., 2010, 'Drive-Ins Downunder', <http://drive-insdownunder.com.au/default.htm>, accessed 16 August 2011.

Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drive-in\\_theater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drive-in_theater) accessed 16 August 2011.

Motion-Wise, M., 2011, 'Nomination to the ACT Heritage Register – Starlight Drive-in Theatre Sign'.

*The Canberra Times*, 2 January 1957, 17 October 1982, 29 November 1982, 9 April 1987

*City News*, 7-13 October 2010

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

'I was at the Starlight Drive-in the night it opened in 1957. I was just four years old. From then on mum and dad took my two sisters, my brother and me to the drive-in about twice a week for the duration of my childhood. I then started going there on dates as a teenager in the late '60s and early '70s.

We always had old cars without heaters so Dad used to heat house bricks in the oven and wrap them in a blanket that he would place on the floor in the back of the car. The bricks kept us warm for hours. It wasn't until many years later that heaters were available on the speaker units.

We used to go Wednesday nights for 'Ranch night' and Saturday nights for the new feature. Intermission would see hundreds of pyjama-clad children racing to the playground to get the best position on the hurdy-gurdy.' Judi Sindel, Kambah, *CityNews*, Oct 28-Nov 3 2010.